THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

DECEMBER, 1956

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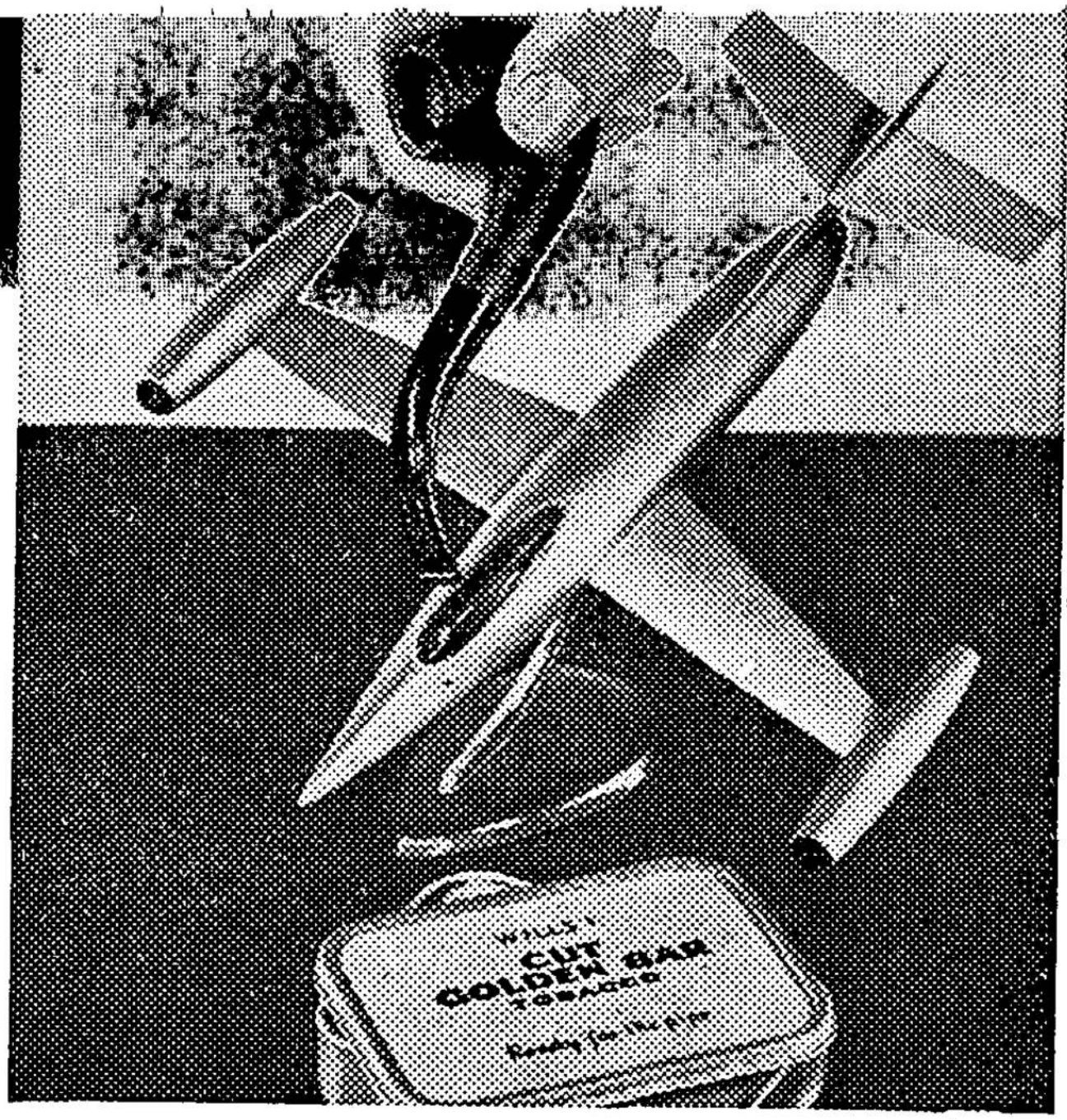

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ARGOSY

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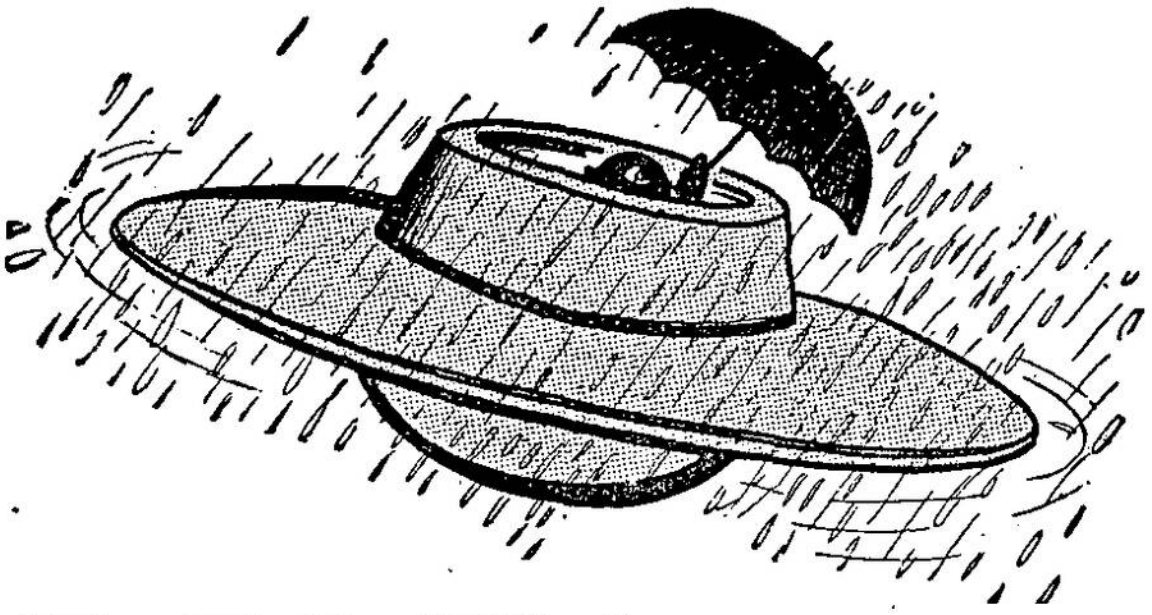


ARGOSY Log Book

THE most notable thing about 1956 has undoubtedly been the weather. Sightseers or scientists in flying saucers on conducted space-tours of the Spiral Nebula and Great and Little Bears (return via Earth and the Milky Way) will have observed that the terrestrial natives are semi-aquatic, covered with transparent plastic skins, and have umbrella-shaped cranial appendages. Tellurians appear to be sun-worshippers for they have large oval green spaces near all towns onto which, whenever there is a blink of sunshine, they dart and perform some rapid and mysterious rite with balls and stumps. Sages who have made a special study of terrestrial history believe these rituals to be connected with more primitive but similar practices, performed thousands of years before on a larger scale at Stonehenge, where gigantic ancestors of the present-day natives played rounders with enormous stone balls.

It is to be hoped that flying saucers have lids of some kind, otherwise our observers will have had a damp vigil before returning to base to be dried off with immense tea-cloths.

"Move over a bit, will you, Captain, the water's up to my knees."

"Sorry, can't help it. Mustn't get the instruments wet. What a climate they have on this planet."

And their tape-recorders of terrestrial sounds will report nothing but a monotonous pitter-patter. Small wonder that no one has tried to colonize this planet for the last few million years.

Little do they know that inside those drab, damp-looking

burrows, happy Tellurians are snug by their firesides, reading the new issue of Argosy.

There is something special about an Argosy story—what is it? Some of the stories we print are by world-famous authors, others are the first-published works of new young writers . . . What is it that they all have in common?

We are asking readers this month to send us in their own words a description of the essential quality they expect of an Argosy story. Does it touch your heart or knock you flat? Does it disturb or satisfy? It's up to you to tell us what you look for when you open your copy. Entries, which must be twelve words or under, on a postcard, should be sent to The Editor, Argosy, The Fleetway House, London, E.C.4, by November 10. Result of our September competition is on page 90.

H. A. Manhood has a highly picturesque and individual mode of existence, for he lives, with his wife, in a segmented residence made from converted rolling-stock. His kitchen, drawing-room, and bedroom were once the kind of goods truck that cars are carried in; now they are fitted up with all mod. con. and set in a peaceful orchard at Small Dole near Henfield, Sussex. Here Manhood writes short stories, watches the birds in his apple trees, and pursues his hobby of making cider. Both his stories and his cider have the vintage tang that comes from an expert hand: his best known collections are *Apples by Night*, *Lunatic Broth*, *A Long View of Nothing*.

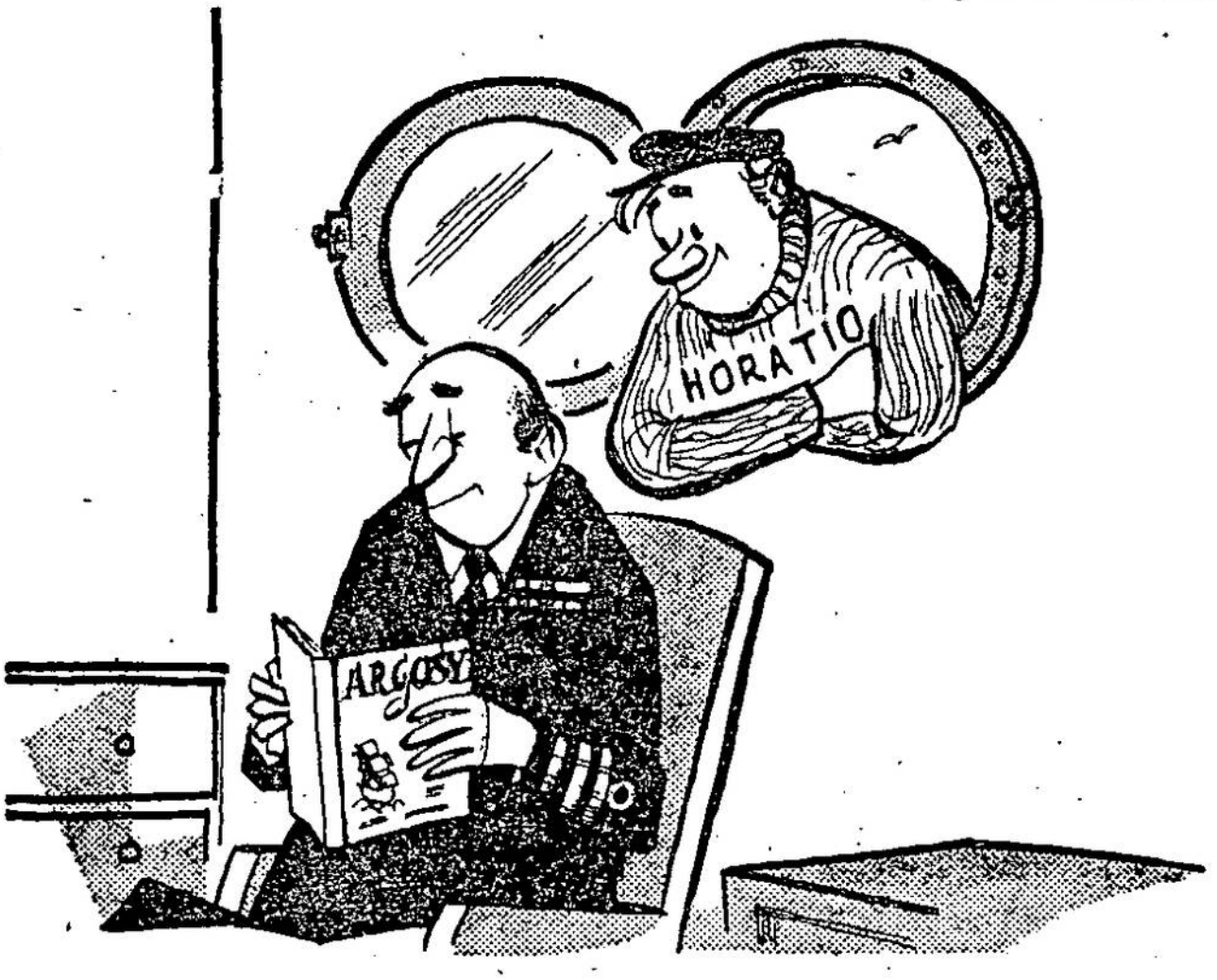
Edmund Gilligan holds a position known as Rod 'n Gun Editor on the New-York Herald Tribune. He highly approves of this institution for, as he says, it requires him to fish for salmon and trout and go hunting for deer and antelope (which he would anyway) and get paid for it, too. Gilligan lives in Bearsville, Ulster County, New York, has four children and also Black Point Hot Toddy, a Labrador retriever. When not shooting or fishing he writes, and has produced eight novels, most of which he deeply regrets and, at times, stamps upon when he comes across a copy. He excepts *Boundary Against Night* and *I Name the Mara.*

Mark Derby would rather have a nice jungle than Piccadilly Circus any time. He began travelling in his teens, walking from Gretna Green to Land's End and writing a novel on the way. Since then he has gone on writing and travelling, mainly in remote islands and highlands of Indonesia and the backwoods of Borneo. He has a house in Minorca. Most recent novels are *The Sunlit Ambush, The Big Water, Out of Asia Alive.*

Alexander Woollcott, author of this month's reprint, will be remembered best as the hero (and self-portrait) of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, and as an acid New Yorker critic.

Inspector Petrella, that talented feller, is on the trail again this month in number two of **Michael Gilbert**'s new series.

JOHN SILVER



PHANTOM OF THE BRIDGE

"Where are you?" he cried through the swirling mist

BY LEON WARE

THEY came out of the woman's house and got into the police car. Ben Millar, the reporter, pushed his hat back on his head and thoughtfully lit a cigarette while Sergeant Sam Harris reported on the radio.

Over the roof of an apartment building Ben could see the slim pillars and a segment of the great bridge as it began its leap across the channel. From a distance the structure seemed a fragile tracery against the darkening sky, the massive supporting cables only pencil-thin above the wide strait. Dark objects that were cars appeared like moving targets in a shooting-gallery, suddenly materializing, sweeping across the road, disappearing again.

Sam hung up the transmitter and started the engine.

"You think she did see a child, Sam?"

Harris drove the car away from the kerb. "Maybe. It all fits in. For quite a while now we've been getting reports from motorists about seeing somebody up there on the bridge. Always at night. Usually when it's foggy."

"It would make quite a story," Ben said.

They rolled by the entrance ramp and on past the rows of tenement buildings crouching in the shadow of the huge piers.

"Going up there?" Ben asked.

Harris shook his head. "I'm off in ten minutes. This is somebody else's pigeon."

Ben slumped in the seat. "O.K., I'll pick up my car at the station and take a look."

They rode in silence and Harris finally turned into the police car park. Ben got out and looked back. Dusk had fallen and the headlights of the cars now seemed to move without support across the dark sky.

"What's a kid doing up on the bridge at night?"

It was dark now. The slim destroyer that had drawn the boy

out of the shadows onto the catwalk under the suspension bridge was represented by only a faint light, rolling in the open sea beyond the headlands. Warships fascinated him and he liked to stand high above them, looking down on their narrow decks as they slid silently through the water below the bridge. They made his perch seem even higher than it was, and he loved the sensation of height—the eerie light-headedness that gripped him when he looked down and saw the cables and piers all converging to a pinpoint far below.

On a clear, still night the lights from both sides of the channel glittered like stars against a velvet sky, and even the suburbs across the bay were sharp clusters of illumination, not misty or distorted. When the wind blew, the lights jiggled and danced to the hum of the cables, and the combination was something that thrilled him.

Windy nights were wonderful. The breeze was sharp, and sometimes even biting, but the sounds of his bridge—the hum, the whine, the drone—made a song that always warmed him and satisfied him and comforted him.

But best of all were the many nights of fog. He could go above the road then. He could climb up through the piers by way of the centre staircases and come out on top, more than five hundred feet above the water. Through the damp mist he could run down the great main cables that were slung in a long, sweeping arc from one shore to the other, or he could even slide down any of the thousands of vertical strands to the high wide railing along the traffic lanes. He moved like a cat through the maze of wires and beams, flitting through the fog, silently, surely, secure in the knowledge that he wouldn't be seen.

The bridge was really his then, in the fog. Only motorists crept across it, limited to the damp, shining surface under the cadmium lights, while above them he spun his way, like a busy spider weaving a web for the joy of it.

He was fourteen—a lean and scrawny fourteen, a lithe and agile fourteen—and for a year and a half, ever since a workman had left his key in a metal door at the bottom of one of the huge piers, this bridge had been his after dark.

In a life that had been as empty and fruitless as his, the bridge was a miracle. He was only five when the work had begun and as a toddler he had often slipped away from his shabby home, to stand in awe as the shovels dug and the forms were built and the steel set and the concrete poured. He measured his span of life not in years, but from the caissons to the cribbing, to the road level, to the pierheads.

He was eight when the cable-spinning began, and it was a

standing joke in the district that if Tommy Murnane was missing, if anybody cared, he was up on the bridge, watching the spinners. No man on the job had a better attendance record than Tommy Murnane—it was as if, knowing the bridge was to be his home, he had to be on hand to see it built correctly.

He was selling papers when he was eight, walking the streets, free-lancing. When he was ten he was wiry enough to put up a fight, and then he had his own territory. Of course, it was near the bridge—at the last traffic light before the ramp started upward. He did well there, for the motorists were through the worst of the traffic and had begun to relax enough to think about their evening papers.

His mother died about that time. A frail, tired woman, she had long since given up trying to make a home of the two rooms in the shabby tenement. He saw his father only occasionally, and then he was usually drunk or in trouble. Small trouble—thirty-to-ninety-day trouble. It seemed a natural situation to Tommy. Most of the other men in the building disappeared from time to time for similar periods.

The death of the boy's mother sobered his father temporarily. He drank, but he managed to come home most nights. He sat in the one big chair, his sharp, dark eyes following his son round the room, blinking. Tommy did the cooking—what there was done—and the cleaning—which was little.

Shortly after his twelfth birthday he was wakened one night by his father. He was aware of his father's agitation.

"I gotta get out, kid. I gotta go fast. I'll get in touch with you. You'll be all right?"

"Sure," Tommy said sleepily.

"You'll pay the rent?"

Tommy nodded. He'd paid the rent for two years.

"You'll be O.K., kid." His father fumbled his way around his bed and slid to the door. "I gotta go now. So long."

At dawn, two hard-faced cops had arrived. They went through the apartment quickly.

"Got a mother?"

"She's away," Tommy said glibly.

"You'll be here alone?"

"My dad—"

The cops laughed; short, mirthless laughter. "He'll be gone quite a spell this time, kid."

He didn't go to school that day. He liked school; he liked geography and history and arithmetic. But they didn't interest him at the moment, and after a scanty breakfast he made his way to the bridge. He stood by the huge piers at the edge of the

rushing water, and after a long time turned to look at the steel door in the great structure.

And there was the key. A workman had forgotten it. Tommy slipped the key into his pocket and then, his heart pounding with excitement, pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside.

He had known the piers weren't solid, that a shaft ran up through their centres, but he hadn't realized there would be partitions making floors and rooms. There was a lift, even, and a wide steel staircase. The moan of the wind was gone and there was only the sound of his own breathing in the damp, musty air.

He went up the steps, floor after floor, listening, moving softly through the gloom, the only light coming from the occasional narrow aperture in the thick concrete.

There was a steel door in the wall on the level below the road. He could hear the hollow zoom of traffic overhead. He pushed the door open cautiously.

The whole area, a hundred and ten feet wide, was cut into corridors and rooms. The walls were of white tile, gleaming under the lights. The corridors were in the shape of a T, the short ends leading to the two piers, the longer length extending from the ramp side to another door, near him, opening towards the water. The shining hall was empty and silent when Tommy stepped out into it. He pushed open the steel door facing the water and caught his breath.

From below, the space under the road level had seemed a maze of girders and cables. He saw now that a broad catwalk ran all the way across, with smaller walks branching off. He noticed a few workmen, hard at their endless paint job. The wind poured in through the door, clean, cool, and noisy—full of life. One of the workmen started along the catwalk and Tommy ducked back into the pier and down the stairs.

When he reached ground level, the lift was whining above him and he darted out, still fingering the key in his pocket. His excitement was intense—something was working within him, swelling, developing, growing. He found himself on his street and slipped into the apartment building and up the stairs.

Blowzy Mrs. Buller looked out of her doorway across the hall. " Somebody from Welfare was here, lookin' for you."

His heart jumped. He knew what that meant. People from Welfare were always poking their noses into the affairs of the tenants.

His chin came up. " They aren't going to find me."

Mrs. Buller blew at a straggling lock of hair. " I told her you was gone to the country with relatives."

" Thanks."

He went into the gloomy rooms, gathered up the bedding, all his clothes, the few kitchen utensils, and what little food was left. He put his torch into his pocket and then swung the pack over his shoulder.

Mrs. Buller glanced out again when he stepped into the hall. " Good luck, kid."

" Thanks."

He left the bundle at the store where he collected his newspapers and spent the rest of the school day keeping out of sight of any wandering truant officer. The papers went quickly in the evening rush and he ate a slow dinner at the Greek's. Then, when it was dark, he picked up his bundle and made his way through the undergrowth to the locked door. The key fitted, turned quietly, and he swung the door inward.

He turned on the flashlight, and moved slowly up the iron stairs, his footsteps echoing in the silence. When he finally reached the door on the upper level, he was panting. He pushed it open cautiously.

Faint blue lights gave the corridors a ghastly glow. The traffic overhead rumbled loudly, but there was no sound from this level. He prowled the corridor from end to end, looking in all the store-rooms, most of which held drums of cables and barrels of paint. And eventually he found a ventilating-shaft with a hinged grille in one of the waterside rooms. The shaft led into a cubicle overlooking the water, a heavy iron grating masking a large intake opening. He could stand and walk about in the space, and there he spent the night.

The next day he managed to smuggle in a two-casement-type window to cover the grating. Then he had a room, snug and tight, and when he ran an electric cord to an outlet, he had both light for the darkness and heat for the single hot-plate that served as a stove. The room was chilly on foggy nights without the plate burning, but there was no one to complain about the electricity bills. He learnt that his key fitted the door at the end of the corridor, as it did all the doors, and was saved the long climb up through the tower.

He graduated from grammar school and went into high school with his heart in his mouth, but his attendance was regular and his marks good, and they didn't check up on him. The quarters were comfortable and the ever-present possibility of discovery kept him wary and alert, lent spice to his living. During the hours of darkness he became sure-footed and familiar with the catwalks and girders.

The structure was completely his after five o'clock. There

was no watchman, other than the man on the toll gate at the road level. On thick nights he flitted along the cables high above the traffic lanes or even on the road itself.

One evening a car's headlights outlined him and brakes squealed. Tommy flipped over the four-foot railing and down a convenient cable to a girder below. As he sped along the lower catwalk he heard shouts and then, later, the whine of a police car. For a long time there was activity up there and a police boat arrived, prowling the dark waters with its powerful searchlights. He had seen the boats before, when some poor soul used the height of the bridge as a solution to his problems. The boats rarely found what they were looking for, because the tide was swift.

The evening of the destroyer's passage the air was soft and damp. He watched the ship's rolling lights until they were suddenly blanked out, and then he became aware of the fog bank rolling in from the sea. He waited while the heavy curtain shut out the western stars, one by one, like lights being turned off in the distance. The wall of fog moved slowly down the channel, and the solid mass of grey surrounded him. He stood up and breathed deeply and walked unerringly back along the catwalk.

He ate his dinner with his window open, listening to the sporadic toots and growls of the ships moving cautiously across the shrouded waters. When he went out again the dull, glistening catwalk beckoned, a shadowy tunnel through the fog, tinted now by the cadmium lights overhead.

The breeze was increasing, the mist driving through the maze of girders in long trails. The cables had begun their singing, a low chord, rising and falling a little, then mounting again to a higher note.

There was one point at which the song of the bridge produced an indefinable ecstasy in the boy's body, and he thrilled now in anticipation.

He went all the way across the bridge, up a cable, to an I-beam, to a concrete elbow, and from there, up over the railing to the highway. He stood in the shadow of the towering pier, watching the blurred headlights burn out of the fog and swish-swish by. He moved slowly back towards his side, and the song of the cables suddenly reached the chord that moved him so deeply.

He stood entranced, his face lifted. He was no longer aware of the passing cars or of the one car that did not pass, but pulled to an erratic stop a few paces behind him. The slamming door broke into his enchantment and he turned quickly, in time to see a slight figure stumble to the railing and begin an awkward, slipping climb up the balustrade.

" Don't! " he shouted.

He sprang forward and grabbed at the dark clothes. A woman turned to look down at him—the eyes wide and staring, her face white.

"Let go," she said flatly. "Let go!"

He pulled her back to the pavement. "Don't jump off my bridge!" He was yelling, but he didn't realize it.

She pulled free from his grasp and began the slow, methodical climb once again. He seized her skirt.

"Let go," she repeated in the same dull, strangled voice. "Let go."

But he jerked her back again, and just then another car pulled to a halt and a man appeared out of the fog. Tommy turned and ran off into the shadows. He didn't pause until he reached the tower, then went up, over the railing and down a wet cable.

He panted, both from exertion and from the shock of what the woman had tried to do. He slipped into his room, shaking, fumbling numbly along the walls. He fell onto his bunk and lay there shivering, seeing the white, vacant face, the wide, staring eyes; hearing her flat *Let go. Let go.*

The next afternoon he tore the twine from his bundle of papers and quickly scanned the top one. He found the story on the second page, and his hands shook as he read the bold headline:

SUICIDE FOILED BY PHANTOM OF BRIDGE.

The report, by Ben Millar, adequately covered the suicide attempt and then launched into a description of the mysterious boy who had appeared out of the fog to pull the distraught young woman from the rail, and then disappeared again in the mist. The girl, held now at the receiving hospital, could only add that someone had grabbed her and screamed, "Don't jump off my bridge!" She wasn't even sure it was a boy, though the motorist was positive on that point.

The story went on to point out that on other foggy nights travellers had occasionally reported seeing a vague figure up there. There had even been a report, earlier in the evening, of a boy on the catwalk under the road. This both the bridge superintendent and the highway commissioners scoffed at. It was impossible, they maintained, but a thorough investigation would be instituted.

He couldn't keep his mind on his papers after that. He missed several regular customers, and twice cars almost hit him. He finally forced himself to be alert, and when dusk fell and his papers were gone, he felt lost.

He hitched a ride down to the city, ate dinner in a cheap café, and sat unseeing in a movie. At midnight he made his way back

to the bridge and, for the first time in months, used the door at the foot of the pier.

He made his way silently upward, pausing to listen, and finally reached his cubicle in safety. He undressed in the dark and lay uneasily in his bunk, depressed, as if someone he had trusted had not necessarily failed him, but had been found wanting in a crisis.

But the soft, familiar sounds gradually eased his apprehension. Here was safety; here was protection. He drifted off to sleep, waking once, his heart pounding, only to realize that a dream of a white-faced woman with dark, staring eyes was the cause of his discomfort. When he woke again the room was bright with daylight.

The next night was clear and moonless. He worked his way high in the tower until he was more than two hundred feet above the road. He rested his elbows on the ledge of an aperture and looked down on the cars that slid soundlessly across the span. One car stopped just below him. A man got out and Tommy's heart leapt as the man hesitated, then took off his coat, and walked to the railing.

The wind moaned and Tommy leaned forward. "Don't! Don't jump!"

He jerked back into the tower, trembling. He didn't know whether or not the man had heard him above the wind or how he would react to a thin cry reaching him out of the sky; he only knew that he had to be careful, or he'd be caught.

He leaned against the cold concrete, watching the other side of the bridge. After a time the same car moved slowly along the railing, and he watched it with fascination. Maybe the man had heard him; maybe he'd changed his mind. But while he watched, the car stopped near the far towers and the man got out once more, took off his coat, and walked to the rail. There was nothing Tommy could do now to stop him, and his eyes fixed helplessly on the small figure, far across the strait.

But the man didn't jump. He walked aimlessly back and forth, then got into his car and drove away. Tommy closed his eyes, emotionally spent, then turned back to the steel ladder.

He lay wide-eyed in the darkness of his room. His sleep was tortured, and when dawn came he met it at the grated window, red-eyed and depressed. A change had come upon him during the night and he now faced reality. Sooner or later he would be discovered. What he would do then, when he was taken from his bridge, he did not know. But it would happen.

He came to the decision slowly. He would have to leave. He would have to go before they caught him, because if he left of his

own volition perhaps he could still feel that the bridge was his. He looked at the long, looping cables shimmering in the early sunlight, and his heart ached.

One more foggy night—just one more night so he could roam those strands, feeling beneath his hands and feet their sleek strength. He turned from the view, his vision blurred.

The fog eddied in the glare of the headlights as Ben Millar paused at the toll gate and handed over his fare. The gatekeeper grinned amiably and leaned against the counter, disposed to talk on this night of little traffic.

" You trying to pay for this bridge yourself, Millar? "

Ben smiled. " Expense account. Seen anything? "

" No, and neither will you. Phantom of the bridge! Who're you trying to scare? "

Ben shifted into gear. " It takes brains to be scared, Joe. You're lucky." The man's hoarse laughter followed the car into the fog.

A short distance beyond the great piers at the water's edge, Ben stopped and got out. He stood at the rail, under an amber light, and slowly removed his coat. The wind moaned and the mist swirled around the cadmium lights.

Ben dropped the coat, put both hands on the top of the railing, and gooseflesh suddenly studded his arms as a chill that had no connection with the bite of the wind swept over him. He looked quickly, but the cry seemingly came from the grey void.

" Don't! Don't jump from my bridge! "

Ben turned slowly, trying to see through the fog. " Where are you? "

His voice was flat, lost in the dampness. The only answer was a rising note in the sound of the wind pouring through the steel cables.

" Where are you? " He cupped his hands round his mouth and shouted upward. There wasn't even an echo.

He picked up his coat again and put it on. As he turned towards his car he saw a dark blur from the corner of his eye. He spun quickly, just in time to see something slide down one of the cables. He jumped to the railing, reached out, and grasped the thick strand. He felt a faint vibration and, without thinking, swung over the rail, locked his arms and legs round the wire, and slid downward.

He checked his descent abruptly, suddenly trembling. He could see nothing, but he knew he was high over the water. The light overhead was fuzzy in the vapour, an impossible distance away. His hands slipped and he knew he couldn't climb back.

There was nothing to do now but go down, and he did so, inch by tortured inch, fear mounting within him. What if the wire ended? What if his clutching fingers and gripping legs suddenly found themselves wrapped round nothing?

His feet struck something solid, and the shock was electric. He caught his breath, cautiously felt out with one foot, and found himself on a wide girder. He reached towards a dim outline and caught the rail of a catwalk. He scrambled over it and blessed the firm footing underneath. He lifted his eyes in time to see a blurred rectangle of light appear and disappear towards the shore, and his heart leapt. There was a door there, through which someone had passed.

When he reached it and pushed inside, he found himself in a blue-tinged corridor. There was no sound of footsteps; nothing but a damp, eerie silence. He opened the first door to the right, fumbled along the wall, and found a switch. The light glared.

Light, a floor, a ceiling, and four walls. He shook with a violent reaction. What a stupid impulse. What a crazy, crazy thing to do. He drew a deep breath and wiped the cold sweat from his face. The room was half filled with great drums of wire, but there was no one else in there with him. He was about to leave when he noticed the half-opened grille covering the ventilating-shaft. He stood on a drum and looked through.

"Hullo in there?"

An empty echo. He pushed in farther and thrust his head and shoulders into the dim cubicle. In the glow from the outer grating he saw the bunk and the small, hunched figure.

"I'm a friend," he said. "I'm coming in. Have you got a light?" The figure remained motionless for a moment, then lengthened, and stood up. A bare globe lit the room with a hard glare. Ben blinked, scrambled through the shaft, and stood erect.

He and the boy faced each other. The boy's eyes were sullen; he finally looked away and sat down again on the bunk. Ben swung his gaze around the room, at the scant furnishings, the table with the books on it, the few food supplies.

"Cosy," he said after a moment.

The boy didn't speak.

"Who are you hiding from?"

"I'm not hiding," the boy said.

Ben picked up a geometry book from the table, looked at the name on the fly-leaf, and put it back.

"A bridge is a funny place to live, Tommy. No family?"

"My mother's dead. I'm not in anyone's way here."

Ben's tone softened. "I'm Ben Millar, of the Evening Express. You know the paper?"

The boy lifted his head. "Sure," he said slowly. "I sell it. You wrote that—that story about the woman."

"That's right. Go to school?"

"Of course."

Ben could feel a change in the boy's attitude. A newspaperman wasn't a cop; he was somebody you could confide in. Ben drew him out with quiet questions, and the pieces began to come together, like a jigsaw puzzle. Here was a homeless, lost boy who had turned to the one thing of permanence he knew—the bridge. Gradually Ben saw what it meant to him—it was mother and father; it was his religion and his philosophy. It was more than a shelter—it was spiritual solace as well. Ben swallowed hard when the boy stopped talking. He picked up the schoolbooks and tucked them under his arm.

"I've got an extra bed in my apartment, Tommy. How about using it tonight?"

The boy got up mechanically and reached for his jacket.

"I was going to leave after tonight," he said dully. "I knew they'd catch me."

"Nobody's caught you," Ben said. "As far as I can see, you've done nothing wrong and a lot that's right—more than most kids would do. What made you go on with school?"

The dark eyes turned up to Ben. "So I could duck Welfare so they wouldn't make me go to work, maybe in a grocery, before I got through my exams."

"I've got an idea you'll be able to finish school," Ben said quietly. "Come on, let's go." He turned to the shaft and then looked back at the boy. "Do we have to climb up that cable to the road?"

The boy was looking round the room, and the ache in his eyes twisted a knife in Ben's heart. He repeated his question.

"No." The boy sighed. "No, my key fits the tower door up there."

They stepped out into the wet fog on the road level and closed the door behind them. There were three cars parked near Ben's, and a cluster of men in uniform milled round it. Keeping Tommy at his side, Ben pushed into their midst.

"What's going on?" he asked.

A cop turned irritably. "Another joker went—What the devil, Millar! We thought you'd jumped!"

Ben grinned at the bank of startled, relieved faces. "Me? I'm a happy man. Why should I jump?" He opened the door of his car. "Hop in, Tommy."

As the boy started to obey, a cop growled, "Hey, who's the kid?"

Ben smiled. " Friend of mine. Works for the paper."

He slipped into his seat, shut the door, and started the engine. He glanced at Tommy and saw an expression of dawning hope cross the boy's face. Ben turned the car, waved idly to the glowering police, and slipped through the fog and down the ramp. At the bottom of the incline he stopped the car, opened the door, and motioned for the boy to get out.

" Come here," he said. " I want to show you something."

They walked through the fog to an elaborately decorated niche in the wall. Ben pointed at a bronze plaque.

" See that? A lot of important names there—the Governor, the Commissioners, supervisors—and they don't mean a thing."

He wiped his finger over the small raised letters at the bottom of the tablet. " This is the man who counts—Robert A. Foster, Engineer. He's in small print at the bottom, but he's the important one just the same. This isn't your bridge or the Governor's —it doesn't even belong to the people of the state who paid for it. It's Foster's bridge. It takes an engineer to mould the dreams and visions of a lot of people into reality. This is his bridge, Tommy. It always will be; he'll never lose it."

He looked down into the earnest face that was lifted to his, and suddenly, with a feeling of fierce affection, dropped his arm around the boy's thin shoulders. " Come on," he said softly. " Come with me. We'll fix it so that some day you'll really have a bridge of your own—one you'll never lose, either."

* * *

DID YOU EVER?

If you never did, you will find the answers to six of our questions (and some optional ones for number 7) on page 104.

1. *What is the connection between a Settler's Clock and a Laughing Jackass?*
2. *How high is the Leaning Tower of Pisa? How far does it lean?*
3. *Urtica dioica—is this a disease, a character out of Ivanhoe, a plant, or a legal term?*
4. *What is a Knickerbocker?*
5. *Who wrote the words of: a, Rule Britannia; b, Bonnie Dundee? When did they first appear?*
6. *How many Cinque Ports are there? Can you name them? And who is their Warden?*
7. *Take a deep breath and see how many musical instruments beginning with R you can name in the next two minutes. (There are remarkably few.)*

THE BIG SNORE

The glassware vibrated gently
and the birds were silent in amazement

BY H. A. MANHOOD

THE first time I saw Lorenzo he was chasing a girl up and down the lines of his father's vineyard. I never knew why. I sat and waited, eating fat, sugary grapes, and after twenty minutes he came, smiling happily, quaintly businesslike, like an actor who'd taken over the part at short notice, very willing to sell me unlimited quantities of the watch jewels cut, polished, and drilled in the neat family factory by scores of village girls.

The second meeting, a year later, was odd in a different way. On my asking his father where Lorenzo was, the old man shrugged mightily so that his white linen jacket stayed high and rumpled, spreading his hands to the sky in solemn appeal, muttering fervently in Italian even though he had sufficient English to tell me he feared wantonness and a sinful end to this bird-natured youngest son.

Behind him, Lorenzo's sister Victoire, small, dark, and secretly merry, put finger to lips, and when the father had gone, bowed and tragic with the weight of imagining, explained graciously, her love for Lorenzo purring sweetly in her voice.

"Sometimes it is like this. Lorenzo becomes sick with all the business, all the adding and taking-away. He goes off for two, three days, by himself, without saying. I know where he goes. He knows I know and that I will not tell without good reason. He will like to see you, I am sure, and not feel the secret spoilt. Let us go."

She took my hand and we left the factory yard, walking uphill by a narrow path between the high, fig-covered walls surrounding other tiny factories, across a bridge, into a tree-shaded mountain road, standing aside to let drooling cows pass down to the village, climbing fast until we came to rusted ornamental iron gates large enough for a palace. Victoire forked nimbly through a gap in the wall alongside, beckoning me after.

The drive was overgrown, a ragged tunnel through broken, vine-tangled pergolas, and at the end was a forlorn, shuttered villa. Victoire went to a particular shutter midway along the

terrace, indicating that it would open at a touch; then she turned sedately and was gone back through the leafy tunnel, smiling happily to herself. Agreeably puzzled, I approached.

Someone—it must be Lorenzo—was playing a piano with dream-sharp skill, the harmony splendidly insistent, dispelling neglect and decay so that the ruined garden seemed to shrug itself back to tidiness, become murmurous with an ancient gaiety. And then the notes stumbled, were picked up angrily, tossed janglingly together, and killed with one swift stroke.

I opened the shutter and there, in the dimness, surrounded by bony, sheeted furniture, was Lorenzo, seated at a half-draped piano, bent tiredly, staring blamefully down at his hands. He looked round at the sudden, funnelling light, saw me, said hullo, at first flatly, then with enthusiasm, promising that he would not be more than a minute or two. Methodically he resheeted the piano, explaining that it was the best one thereabouts. He had no right to the use of it but it was a fine instrument and not sensible to be wasting its life away in idleness. Yes, he wrote music a little and played a lot when life became too wormy.

And what about me? Was the health good, the appetite ready for food and drink? There was a special small restaurant down by the lake; they were used to his beard and the wrong creases in the clothes after the time of worms, unsurprised by appetite or rudeness, satisfied if he played piano for them before going to make peace with his father.

The third meeting was recent, here, at home, unexpected and quite as remarkable.

It was early summer, early morning too, one of those benign mornings that roll like pearls from the warm, scented darkness. The mists shrank and shivered away before the long rods of sunlight, and the blueness overhead hardened from a powdery, flowery softness to choice, untouchable enamel. The lace spread of dew on chairs and table dried as if licked away by racing insects foreseeing the drought of the day, and the smell of coffee came strongly, a burnt, open-handed richness on the air. Sounds were small and lazy, the orchard tied to stillness by a shimmer of cobweb.

And then, bouncing across the quiet like a stone from an idiot, came a sudden startling fanfare. A large car hesitated in the lane, turned triumphantly into the drive, and out hopped Lorenzo, beautifully clothed, smiling like an enchanted schoolboy. He came at a run, clumsy-footed in his excitement, shaking hands strongly.

"Surprised? So am I! So is everyone. It is all wonderful. Success, I love it very much. Coffee, do I smell the good coffee?

Wonderful again! We came straight from the city. The work is done so we make holiday."

"We?"

"My God, I forget Claudella! Dear Claudella, she work so hard and now she sleep so hard. I will bring her. I tell her coffee waits and a lot of peace too."

I don't know what I expected but certainly not to see the peachy, dancing-hipped Claudella Dalbiac herself come yawning up the path, very lovely even with the yawning. She flopped into a chair, kicked off her shoes, blew out her cheeks most entrancingly at me in greeting, and mewed for coffee. But even before the coffee came she had dozed off again.

Lorenzo shrugged lugubriously, then, noticing a hammock slung between two apple trees, he grinned clownishly and, picking Claudella up with surprising ease, as if she were pink candy and not solid flesh, he put her neatly into it, spreading limbs and clothes comfortably, returning to the coffee and, yes, eggs and bacon too, for the appetite was large now that the strain was over and success beginning.

"But you know nothing of the suddenness, the tip-top madness, and the sugar-money that is always ripe and ready for some people. I will tell you."

One morning I am checking figures and wishing I am a cow or a little bird and no need to check, when a car comes into the factory yard like a terribly mad dog. Someone to see me but I can think of no one with so much car. More business I think.

It is a small, pink little man, very neat and much crackle, you know. Call him Christopher, Christopher the Wren because of his smallness. An English joke but I do not mind. I am to go to England at once to make music for a film. The great Lasque Hayfew himself has sent for me. By a miracle of luck he has heard a recording of my *Machine Shop 1949*. I write this in fun, for myself, but they all think it serious. I have never heard of Hayfew but it does not seem the right moment to say so. I am the one man in the world to make background music for his film.

But it must be done very much at once. Time has nearly run out. I have a completely free hand, name my own price, and all expenses. I make up my mind quick. What to lose anyway? I tell Victoire to tell the news, tell everybody good-bye through her.

We race in the mad-dog car to Rome airport. London next but no time to see it. We take private plane to a not-so-nice place by the sea. High rock and a wildness fit for the wildest boar. There is a hotel on the edge, big and cold like a railway station. The Hayfew man has booked it complete.

I wish to see him to find out just what he wants, but that is not possible today, tomorrow, or the day after. He is at sea, filming some shots of a rubber island they have made. This island they can sink and make rise again. It is two acres big with castles on top, very wonderful, better than real. It cost many thousand pounds and is all part of the story. Fourteen people tell me the story all at once and give me a script in case they missed anything.

They have a room ready for me in this hotel; even though many people are camping outside they have found room for me. I am important. This room, it has a bed, a bar, a concert grand, and a telephone to order the food or anything else necessary. Also there is a machine to run film through very fast and a copy of all the film they have made, rough-edited but very close to the final form. The Hayfew man knows what he wants and works fast; he expects me to do the same.

They take me to the room, expect me to start right away, before I wash hands or blow nose. I say yes, wave them good-bye. Then I take a drink and talk on the telephone about food. Anything is possible. There is one French, one Italian chef, and they fix me up good, like a special son.

Then I sleep. Then I run some film through and then I ring up the chefs again just to make sure everything is real and this is the film they have spent so much money on. The chefs say yes and they laugh very happily and tell me not to worry. They are preparing brodetto for their own private supper and will send up a portion for me very special.

The story is not believable in any direction. Eight people have had the writing, all imbeciles, I think. It is called *Queen of Lyonesse*. An island jumps up out of the sea every so often, full of busy but sad people. They wish to stay afloat but this cannot happen until their queen marries a mortal prince. It is a legend. I decide to forget legend. I run more film through on the peep-show machine and hope I find a key. I keep running the film but no key, no shape, no music. I try hard. I rattle the piano sometimes to let them know I am trying.

Then more trouble comes. No sleep, except by day when I should be working. Someone snores in the next room, such a snore! It is like angry bulls playing the tug-of-war; the rope breaks, they fall over, and then they start all over again. It is like much boiling water, bones breaking, mountains grumbling, and sometimes it is like rats pulling a lot of corks. It is terrible.

I ask to be moved but it is not possible, the place is too full. There is a door between and I find a key, take a look at this snorer. I am surprised. I expect fatness, baldness, a big nose, and false teeth, but instead it is she, Claudella, the big star.

I cluck-cluck in my surprise and she wakes. I explain and she is much annoyed. She has never snored in all her life. She throws things at me. She will complain to Lasque when he returns, sink my ship for good. I shut the door and think. I will prove that she does snore and then I will find a remedy to make her quiet and happy. So I borrow a tape-recorder and fix all the noises very nicely.

I have the idea to play them all back to Claudella but the next day she has gone to act a bit more queen on the rubber island. These are the last shots needed. Soon they will all be back. They expect the music to be ready too but I have done nothing. Now it is quiet still nothing comes. It is too quiet. I miss the snoring.

I think about Claudella and I play the recording over and over just to remind me. I beat time to it, make up talk, quarrel with it. Then I notice something, a sort of rhythm in the big snore and bits of plain-song in the whistlings and poppings. The big noise is the sea and the little noises are all the rivers running into it; fish-talk, wind-rush, and jumping water—it is all there.

Suddenly I have a theme, a framework. I keep all the snore noises and I pin flowers on them, chase them, mock them, cut them up, and put them together again—a variation on a variation on a variation, and it works! It is not music but it is a sensational noise, stretchable, dramatic as smashing trains. I work fast. I put a lot of complicated noise on paper. They can use what they want how they want, fast or slow, tight or loose. I record the motifs, the whole general idea. The big snore is a great success. I say it is the sound of the sea in eternal conflict.

The Hayfew man is delighted. He doubles the price he is to pay and I am on expenses like himself. The musical director can take over from there, synchronize sound and movement. Now I must relax, save my great talent for his next film.

Claudella is impressed. She says she is very sorry she throws things at me and maybe she has a little tiny snore after all; we must make proper investigation. I say it is nothing, easily cured. I will make her a gift of a cure. We make a game of it.

We choose the big man in the business of nose and throats. He says there are all kinds of snores up to eighty decibels of sound and seven hundred cures, medical and old wives'. He takes a long time looking down Claudella's throat. I think he is enjoying himself too much, considering what I pay.

He tells us the cause of the snore is a little piece of flesh tissue which vibrates in the air stream. He will remove it. He does that but we never see it. I would like to see it but he says it is not possible, only for experts! But there we are, Claudella is cured and so happy.

I think now I can tell her about the score, share the joke. Last night there is what they call a sneak showing of the film, just to see audience reaction. I tell Claudella about the big snore. She listens for it, finds it—you can't miss it anyway—and begins to laugh. We cannot stop laughing. We spoil the film for all the good people who have paid and are loving it, so they throw us out.

We are not tired, so we drive, then we eat, sleep a little, then we drive some more. I remember you. We came a very circular way but here we are and I am very happy.

He looked it too. He whistled in tune with a passing cuckoo, stretched yawningly, said Victoire sent her love, and what a nice place to live. He would like to live so himself but it was not possible to buy or rent or settle anything until the Hayfew man made up his mind what the next picture was to be. Certainly Claudella would star in it, but it might be anything, located anywhere. The Hayfew man was pleasantly mad and had options like cherries all over, and everyone anxious to supply the money . . .

Full of questions as I was, I had to go then to give instructions to a jobbing gardener. It was necessary to give this man at least ten jobs to do so that he had ample choice as his mood and energy varied. Even so he was apt to start on some completely undesirable scheme of his own. Straightforward word of mouth was not sufficient: I wrote the various jobs large in chalk on a slate, the most necessary ones at the bottom for his mind seemed to work that way when it worked.

Going through the list, somewhat argumentatively, took time. When I returned to Lorenzo he, like Claudella, was sound asleep in his chair. I knew they were both asleep for I could hear them at some distance. Both were snoring so tremendously that glassware vibrated gently and the birds were silent in amazement.

The jobbing gardener came to stare. "You'd think they'd do themselves harm," he said, and began listing cures, but I waved him rudely away and went away myself, hoping they'd wake together, or, if not, that they'd see the funny side.

A long time after, I heard them laughing. I gave them a little while for private enjoyment and then went to suggest food and drink. But when I got there they were asleep again, underneath the hammock, in each others' arms, the snoring, remarkably, now no more than a gentle, melodious purr.

NEW! GAY! COMING IN ARGOSY!
"THE ABODE OF LOVE"
BY AUBREY MENEN

A PLATE OF ROAST BEEF

Police cars prowled the streets
in search of the vanished restaurant

BY KEM BENNETT

EARLY one May morning a flying saucer hovered over the small town of Walker, California. Nobody was about to see it, and without attracting the slightest attention it came quietly to earth on the outskirts of the town on Highway 399. Having settled itself, it then changed; that is to say, it lost the well-known shape of a flying saucer and acquired instead that of a roadside eating-house, complete with neon signs saying: CHARLIE'S CAFE—*Steaks, Dogs, Burgers, Fried Chicken a Speciality.*

At sixish, a truck-driver called Ollie Lindberg, new to the route and therefore lacking the habit of eating any place in particular, pulled his truck into the forecourt of Charlie's, got out, tried the door, found it open, and walked inside.

He never came out.

Not far away a man in pyjamas stood at his bedroom window, yawning. When he saw Charlie's Café in the distance, he blinked and frowned; turned away from the window, shaking his head and wondering if his eyes deceived him. Taking a second look, he was just in time to see a flying saucer take off from an empty lot on Highway 399.

The police were at first cynical, but after they had examined Ollie Lindberg's deserted truck they changed their tune slightly.

Two days later a restaurant landed near Greenway, Virginia, where it abducted a coloured girl called Esmeralda Dingle who dropped in for a coke on her way to work.

These events made happy times for the Press. The newspapers went to town with banner headlines like *Sabre Jets Stand by*, *Don't Use Strange Eateries*, *Physicists Say It Can't Happen*, and *Is This The Prelude To Invasion?*

Then reports from France, where a saucer simulated a bistro, and from England, where another displayed the versatility to turn itself into a mock-Tudor public house complete with phoney oak beams and plasterwork, spread the publicity over the face

of the world. The only element of the world's population who failed to enjoy the sensation were the proprietors of the remoter eating-places, whose trade fell off considerably.

The farmer stopped his station wagon on the main highway before turning into the entrance to his farm. "This is as far as I go, friend. There's a cross-roads a mile farther up. Ain't nothing much there but a petrol station, but you should be able to thumb a lift into Gallup easy enough."

Jeremy thanked him, got out, fished his rucksack from the back of the wagon, waved as the farmer drove down the dirt road, and then trudged off in the direction of the cross-roads. The vastness of America's Middle West stretched away for mile after mile on every side. Not for the first time this vastness pressed in on Jeremy, reminding him of his loneliness, his poverty, and his utter lack of prospects.

While he trudged he thought of Los Angeles, where he had been a writer until the panic impact of three-dimensional pictures had caused his studio to drop his option like a hot brick. Los Angeles meant the following things to Jeremy: success, three pictures, three years with money dripping out of his trouser pockets, an imported car, a house off Beverley Glen Boulevard in the Santa Monica Mountains, and marriage to an actress with plenty of shape, no scruples, and a ratlike disdain for sinking ships. It had also meant two years with no pictures, less and less money, less and less house, car, and actress.

Had he had the wit, he told himself as his tattered boots scuffed up the dust of the roadside, he would have got out quick—while there was still enough money in the bank to buy him a ticket back to England. In England the 3-D scare was over before it ever arrived. In England he might even have been able to go back to writing the sort of thing writers ought to write—novels, for example, or anyway short stories . . .

Five minutes later Jeremy lifted his gaze from the dusty black surface of the highway, already warming up as the morning sun got into its stride, and looked ahead with narrowed eyes. In the distance he could see the cross-roads, marked by a transverse line of telegraph poles, and two low, shacklike buildings. One of these he identified by its pumps as the petrol station the farmer had mentioned, and the other had the look of a roadside café.

He put his hand into his trouser pocket, feeling the shape and pleasant solidity of the silver quarter which was all the money he possessed. Coffee? or maybe a sandwich? or a packet of cigarettes? His mouth watered. To hell with the cigarettes.

Jeremy's pace increased. Head bent, rucksack pushing him

forward and downward as he leaned into his stride, he drove his lankiness towards the cross-roads.

Then, some time later, he stopped. "Ain't nothing much there but a petrol station," the farmer had said. Jeremy stared, frowning, towards the cross-roads. Two buildings—one of them, by now unmistakably a petrol station and the other, equally unmistakably, an eating-place. Recent headlines leapt into his mind's eye. Then he shrugged. Don't be a fool, Jeremy, my boy; the farmer must have forgotten.

But the farmer hadn't forgotten. At the roadside, two hundred yards from the cross-roads, a woman and two children cowered in the ditch while a man in a mechanic's greasy overalls stood above them, staring towards the café. He had a shotgun in his hands.

"Good morning," Jeremy said.

The man turned. His eyes were bright with panic. "It's one of Them! I tell you it's one of *Them*!"

"How do you know?"

"Last night, when we went to bed, it ain't there. This morning it is."

"Fancy that," Jeremy said.

"Come again?" The garage mechanic was looking at Jeremy as if he suspected he were a Martian. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"I'm an Englishman. Flat broke. Trying to get home. I was a writer in Hollywood until the roof fell in."

"Oh." Part of the suspicion died out of the eyes of the man in overalls. "What are you gonna do?" he said.

Jeremy had his rucksack on the ground. He opened it and took out a pencil and a notebook. He was smiling. "I'm going to have a look at it."

"You must be crazy! You don't know what the damn thing'll do. You stay away from it. Maybe it'll take off if we leave it alone."

Jeremy shook his head. "No. I don't think it'll do me any harm as long as I don't go in. I'm going to take a look."

The woman whispered, "Don't go, mister. Those things ain't natural."

Jeremy smiled at her. Then he walked away.

A pulse beat—thud, thud, thud—inside his head, and in the soles of his feet. He hadn't felt anything like it since Anzio in 1943. The palms of his hands were sticky with perspiration and he wiped them one by one on his trousers. Then he wiped sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his waterproof jacket.

"This is it!" an inward voice was saying. "This is your

chance, Jeremy boy! Eye-witness account—syndicated all over the world." Why the hell had he sold his camera? This was a scoop, this was it! He started to wonder how much a first-class suite on the *Queen Elizabeth* would cost him.

REST-A-WHILE CAFE, the sign said over the door. *Come in and Eat! Coffee, Frankfurters, Hot Dogs.*

Jeremy stopped at a safe distance—thirty yards. Was it safe? It felt safe. He propped his notebook on his knee, leaning with his back against a telegraph pole, and sketched the place with careful attention to detail. Then he scribbled down his thoughts —what he could remember of them, for they had been moving too fast for all to be retained. That done, he waited, pencil poised, and watched the café. Nothing happened. The windows revealed no movement. He waited.

Still nothing happened. Jeremy took a few paces forward. A few more. Reluctantly, suspiciously, a few more again. He came to the porch. Wooden door, worn, screened with a gauze curtain, not too clean. Beside the door a rusting beer advertisement was screwed to the weathered woodwork. Doubt crept into Jeremy's mind. Was the garage mechanic mad? Could this —this monument of ordinariness—be a flying saucer in disguise, a visitation, a creation of non-human beings? For heaven's sake!

In a moment of careless disbelief he put his foot on the step of the porch. Nothing happened. He advanced. Nothing happened. He reached out his arms and gently, gently pushed the door. It swung open.

Inside, there was a service counter, tables with plastic tops, peeling chromium fittings behind the counter, a cash register, and a man.

The man was as tall as Jeremy—six foot and a little more. He had a brown face and greying hair, well-kept brown hands resting gently on the counter, and a warm, welcoming smile. He wore a white overall with a name embroidered over the breast pocket—*Charlie Smith.*

" Good morning," he said in English. " What can I get you? "

Jeremy stayed on the threshold. He licked his dry lips and then smiled carefully. " Good morning. I . . . I don't know. I can't make up my mind whether I want to eat or not."

" I should if I were you," the man said. " Got to eat to live, you know."

Pause. Jeremy licked his lips again. " Er . . . you see, the trouble is I'm pretty broke. What can you give me for twenty-five cents? "

" Are you an American? " the man behind the bar asked.

" No. English."

" Down on your luck? "

" A bit."

The man nodded sympathetically. " Can happen to anybody. Do you like roast beef and Yorkshire pudding? "

" Ye-es."

" I thought you would, being an Englishman." The man turned, slid open a hatch, and reached for a plate of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, hot, steaming, with roast potatoes on a separate dish on the side. He put it down on the counter, reached for the mustard pot, and said, " There you are—roast beef and Yorkshire pudding—ten cents, since you're broke."

Jeremy had taken a pace backwards. With a very dry mouth he said huskily, " Look. I know! I know what you are—or at least I know you aren't what you seem to be."

" Don't you want your roast beef? " the man said.

" Not bloody likely! "

" Oh." The man was disappointed. He took the plate off the counter and slid it through the hatch behind him. Then turned.

" Where do you come from? " Jeremy asked.

——Silence. The man wiped the counter with a dish-cloth. He looked up. " You wouldn't know if I told you."

" Not Mars? "

" No, not Mars."

" What happened to the other people who walked into one of your—your traps? "

" They were taken back to our World."

" Against their will? "

The man shrugged. Jeremy laughed. " Well, you're not going to get me, chum," he said. " I'm going to write up every word of this fantastic conversation and it'll be printed in every newspaper in the world. After that you'll not find it so easy to get people to walk into your filthy traps."

" I'm afraid," the man said, pressing a button, " that we've got you already."

There were more visitations. Reports came in from the Argentine, Australia, Japan, France again, Germany, Scotland, Switzerland, and Sweden. In the States, one of the traps caught a mentally deficient boy of fifteen when it landed on a vacant lot in a suburban development area near Detroit. But in the States, by now, and in Europe too for that matter, the pickings were less easy for the saucer. Anybody suggesting a roadside halt for a sandwich or a beer was liable to be treated as an agent-provocateur.

In a town in England, housing mostly miners working in nearby

coal-fields, a man threw a bundle of five pounds of gelignite through the window of a suspect road-house, but before the fuse had burnt through, the restaurant changed back into a saucer and was off, leaving the explosive to detonate harmlessly on the empty bit of ground it had vacated. In the States again, near Fort Benning, an army tank crept into range and pumped a high-velocity three-inch shell into one of the traps. Again it instantly changed shape and flew away, and nobody was near enough to say whether it had a hole in it or not.

After that there were no more visitations in England or the United States of America, and the newspapers chortled their triumph for weeks, until their readers were bored to death with the subject.

The visitations in remoter parts of the world declined in number, and the day came when no human being had seen a flying saucer land for more than a year.

Then, early one chilly November morning, when the smog was lying thick over Los Angeles, a police car at La Canada spotted a saucer landing in the valley below, somewhere in the vicinity of Montrose. Radios yakked and chattered. Police cars like swarming bees flocked to Montrose to prowl the streets in search of an unfamiliar restaurant. By half past seven they had found it, a squat, Californian sort of eating-place—ranch-style, calling itself The Gaucho Grill.

The National Guard turned out. Montrose residents going to work didn't, but stopped instead to press against the police cordons blocking off the street fifty yards on either side of the restaurant. Reporters gathered. Three television trucks arrived and half a dozen mobile radio transmitters.

While the commander of the National Guard detachment in his command vehicle, parked in a side street behind The Gaucho Grill, was waiting for the word to open fire, the restaurant door opened and Jeremy walked out.

In the street outside he paused indecisively, looking right and left at the police cordons. Then with a shrug of his shoulders, he walked slowly towards the cordon on the right, holding his hands at shoulder level and eyeing the battery of pistols and police guns, which were covering him, with an expression of apprehensive distaste. He was wearing a grey suit, as well-cut and conventional as one that his London tailor might have made for him, and he looked very well indeed.

When Jeremy was a few paces away from the cordon, a police captain shouted, " Hold it! One false move, and you get the lot."

Jeremy stopped. He swallowed and forced his mouth into a smile. A sea of hostile faces stared at him. The black muzzles

of the police guns menaced him. He found it difficult to know what to say.

" I'm human."

" Yeah? "

" My name's Jeremy Standing. I'm an Englishman. I'd been living in the States for five years when I walked into—into one of those places at a cross-roads on Highway 66 near Gallup, New Mexico, on the 5th of May the year before last . . ."

A woman in the crowd shouted, " Don't you believe him, Officer! He's a monster in disguise. Whyn't you shoot? You never know what he'll do."

" I'm *not* a monster in disguise," Jeremy said huskily. " Please believe me. I'm an Englishman. My name's Jeremy Standing. I told you—"

" Hell of a name," the police captain said. " Where've you been, mister? "

" On a planet outside our galaxy, hundreds of millions of miles from the earth. I—"

" What's it called? "

" They call it Zinfandel."

" Never heard of it."

" I don't expect you have. It exists though. I'm not lying. Why should I lie? I—"

" What do you want? " the police captain growled.

Jeremy shrugged. " I've come back, that's all. I don't know what I want, really. I want to write about it, I suppose. I've got ideas for a film, and I thought maybe . . ."

A man with a microphone was pushing his way through the crowd, trailing cable behind him. " Make way there. Make way, please. I bet you got ideas, Mr. Standing! I bet you have, yes, sir! Now what about telling the people of America what it was like on—on Zin—what'd you say the planet was called? "

" Zinfandel."

" Into the microphone, Mr. Standing, there's a good guy. Zinfandel—say it again, into the microphone."

" It was called Zinfandel," Jeremy said in a loud voice.

" No need to shout, Mr. Standing. Now what was it like? Just tell the nation everything you know about this far-flung planet. You're the first man alive—"

" It was beautiful," Jeremy interrupted. " Green. Mountainous—at any rate in the place where I spent most of my time . . . That was a city called Arryl. The houses are built of a crystalline material that lets in the sunlight. There are strange trees everywhere, and flowers—just like the earth, but different in that much of the vegetation is different. They have daffodils, though, and

narcissi that you couldn't tell apart from terrestrial ones. There must be a lot of other things that are the same there, but it depends upon a coincidence of evolution, you see . . . I don't know. I couldn't see everything, after all. Zinfandel is a planet, slightly bigger than Earth . . ."

"What did you do?" a voice shouted from the crowd.

"I—I lived," Jeremy answered. "I told my friends all that I could about Earth."

"Friends! You mean the inhabitants of Zinfandel, Mr. Standing?" the radio reporter queried.

"Of course—and my other friends too, the people who had walked into one of the eating-places as I did; there were about ten of them in Arryl. Two Americans were there. I have their names if you'd like me to broadcast them."

"Sure, sure. Carry on, Mr. Standing."

"Well, there was a James Minden from New York and a Miss Esmeralda Dingle, a coloured lady from Greenway, Virginia. I'd like their relatives to know that they're well and happy."

The police captain rubbed his cheek with the barrel of his gun.

"Why were you taken, Standing? What's the reason behind all these abductions?"

"Curiosity," Jeremy said simply. "The scientists on Zinfandel wanted to know how human beings worked."

A woman standing up in the back seat of a convertible shrieked, "Oh! He means vivisection!"

"No!" Jeremy was angry. "No," he shouted, "nothing like that. Some of us volunteered for physical examinations, but mostly we just talked—and answered questions. All about our life on Earth, and wars, and politics, and things of that kind."

The police captain nodded slowly. "O.K. That may be true. But now tell me this—you're back, why aren't the others?"

"Because they didn't want to come."

"Didn't want to come! Don't give me that stuff. You mean to say . . ." For almost the first time now, Jeremy smiled. There was an air of knowledge about him, an almost professorial assurance. The threat of dying under the impact of police bullets seemed to have gone. He was holding himself easily, and he looked like a man without a worry in the world.

"Life on Zinfandel is pleasant to live," he interrupted quietly.

"Better than here on Earth?" the radio reporter queried. "Better than life in England—or the United States? That's mighty hard to believe, Mr. Standing."

"I'm sorry if I seem not to appreciate our way of life," Jeremy said. "But, believe me, life on Zinfandel is far and away happier than anything we have ever known."

" How come it's so good? " the police captain wanted to know.

" There is no poverty, hunger, or disease," Jeremy answered. " What one needs is there for . . . for the making. One works if one wants to, not unless. One just lives. And the air on Zinfandel contains a higher proportion of oxygen than terrestrial air. One's brain is marvellously alive, like a child's brain—curious, seeking, unworried, infinitely free to be used. Do you see what I mean? "

" More or less," the police captain said. " Sounds to me like the mountains. I go to the mountains every summer with my kids. Got a shack up there."

Silence. A fat man behind the police captain said suddenly, " What did you eat, mister? "

" Anything," Jeremy answered, " steak and fried potatoes, oysters, fried fish and chips, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding."

" Roast beef! Do you mean to say their food's just like ours, for heaven's sake? "

" Oh no. Their food is so much better than anything we know that most of us stopped making things like steak and oysters after a while. We ate Zinfandel food—because we liked it better."

" What's this ' making things,' Mr. Standing? " the radio reporter cut in. " You keep on talking about making things. Would you care to explain? "

Jeremy looked at the crowd. His expression became a little doubtful. Then he shrugged. In for a penny in for a pound. " It's very simple," he said. " One can make things by thinking them into existence."

Silence. The crowd took the information, chewed on it, said nothing. Then, raucously, from the back, a voice shouted, " How about making me a blonde, mister? Make her like Marilyn."

Jeremy said, " You can't make anything with a soul . . . That is, you can make the body, but it wouldn't be inhabited, if you see what I mean."

" Inhabited, hell! Just make the body, that's all."

" You wouldn't like it if I did," Jeremy shouted.

A quiet, pinched little woman ducked beneath a policeman's arm. " Make something," she said. " Go on, sir. Show us. Make something we can see."

" What? "

" A—a diamond bracelet."

Jeremy held out his hand. The bracelet glinted and glittered in the pale November sunshine.

" Hell! " shouted the man beside the police captain. " *What are we waiting for?* "

From the windows of The Gaucho Grill the man who liked to call himself Charlie Smith on his visits to Earth saw the crowd stampeding down the street. He hesitated no longer than a split second Too many. Dangerous. If they overflowed from the restaurant out into the street many might be injured during the time of the metamorphosis. Then there was accommodation on the journey to be considered; he could expand the saucer up to certain limits, but not beyond. Poor creatures.

Standing in the road outside the restaurant, he let ten people past him—the police captain and the man beside him, because they had a flying start and were first, several younger people who could run faster than the majority, and, last of the ten, the quiet little woman who had asked Jeremy to make something. Behind her there was a gap in the crowd.

Charlie Smith held up his arms . . . and they changed into tentacles. His body became insect-like, scaly; it thickened; it took on a greenish-yellow colour and a metallic sheen. His eyes increased in diameter, became multi-lensed like the eyes of a housefly and shone dully and terrifyingly red. Four more tentacles grew from his thorax, and his legs took on the shape of a beetle's. His gross metallic body canted forwards until it was on all fours, more or less, supported by his beetle legs and two of the tentacles. The terrible eyes shone red at the leading members of the crowd, and the remaining four tentacles waved slowly in the air—in readiness, it seemed, to grasp or to flicker out like striking snakes.

The crowd came to a standstill. The ones in front pressed backwards and the ones behind readily gave way. There was a deathly silence and a stillness that was as brittle as ice.

Jeremy worked his way through the crowd. He held up his arms. " I'm sorry," he shouted. " I'm afraid you've frightened him."

Silence.

A woman's voice shrieked, " He's afraid *we've* frightened *him*! " Hysterical laughter shattered the stillness.

Jeremy held up his arms again. " There are too many of you, that's the trouble. I expect they'll be back for more, but they can't take everybody, don't you see? "

A man said, " Just look at it. Horrible! Like a beetle."

Jeremy turned. He went up to the beetle. Tentacles wavered, feeling his face. A sensitive man at the back of the crowd frowned as it dawned upon him that this was affection—a parting.

The beetle-like creature scuttled into the restaurant. The building shimmered, dissolved, became a silver saucer-shaped machine, rose a hundred feet vertically from the ground, and was gone

In the road, Jeremy stood looking up in the air, following the flight of the saucer until it was no longer even a speck in the sky.

After a while, as their confidence returned, the people advanced again. When Jeremy tore his eyes from the blueness of the sky and looked at the crowd gathered round him, a burly individual said, " Now then, mister. How about making me a gold brick for a start? "

Jeremy saw greed entering the faces of the crowd. He waited for a moment, then shrugged and held out his hand. A small block of gold materialized in the palm—yellow, yellow as sunlight. A gasp of awed delight rose from two hundred throats.

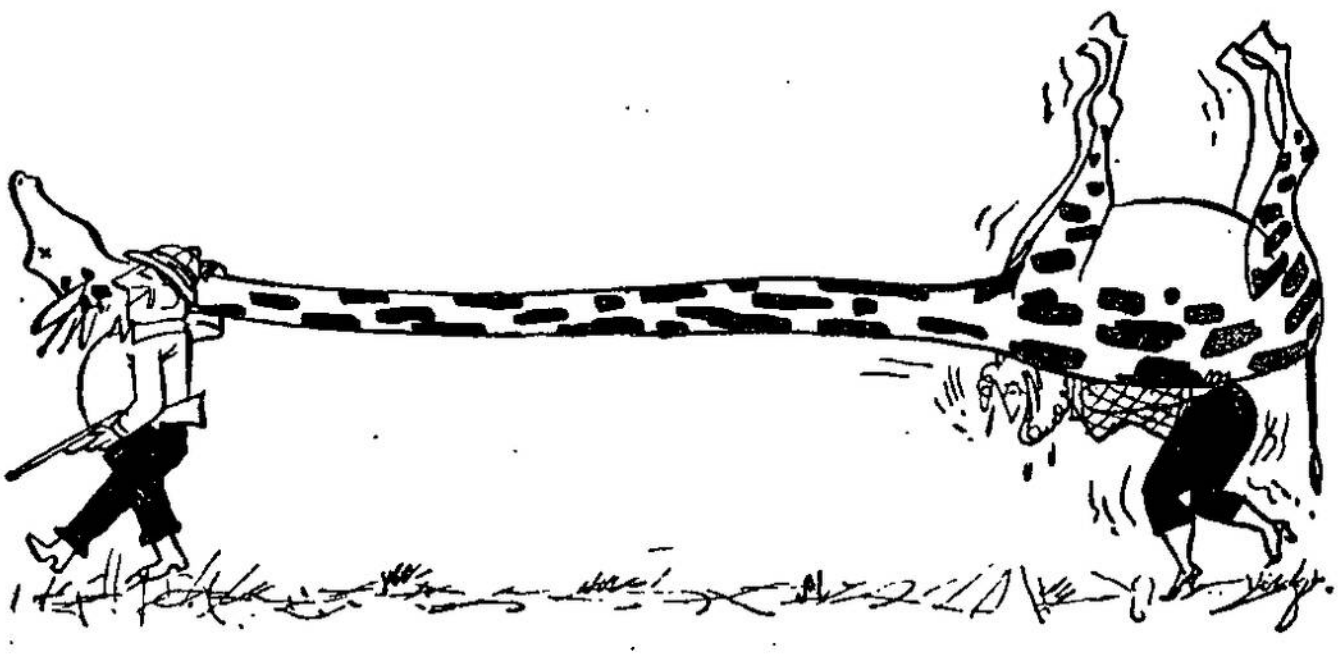
Jeremy threw back his right arm. With the powerful round-arm swing of the grenade-throwing infantryman, he hurled the gold block far over the crowd's heads onto the open space the saucer had just vacated. For a split second the people in the crowd were paralysed. Then they moved. The gold block disappeared beneath a heap of struggling, cursing human beings.

A police car nearby had its door open. A gruff voice said, " Better get in, Mr. Standing. Looks as though you're going to need a bodyguard from now on."

" Yes," Jeremy said. " Thank you." He got in. The door slammed shut. The car edged forward. One of the cops said, " You shouldn't have let on you could make things, Mr. Standing. You'll never get any peace now that folk know about it."

A thought was coming to Jeremy across a thousand miles of sky. It was coming from the man who called himself Charlie Smith. " When you are ready, Jeremy—for another plate of roast beef."

Jeremy opened his eyes. " Yes," he said to the cop on the front seat. " But then I can always go back . . . Now, what shall I make for you two boys? "



Question Time

Quoth John to Joan, will thou have me
I prithee now, wilt ?

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

" Here comes a lusty wooer,
My a dildin, my a daldin;
Here comes a lusty wooer,
Lily bright and shine-a."

" Pray who do you woo?
My a dildin, my a daldin;
Pray who do you woo?
Lily bright and shine-a."

" Woo! Your fairest daughter!
My a dildin, my a daldin;
Woo! Your fairest daughter!
Lily bright and shine-a."

" There! there! She is for you,
My a dildin, my a daldin;
There! there! She is for you,
Lily bright and shine-a."

Old Rhyme

Unsuitable

In the city bathhouse and in the bathhouse of the village, the conversation is the same. Always in the minds of the women there is a lively interest in the young girls. For the women are the suitors of Persia . . .

The first suitor came to my house when I was eleven or twelve. I was at home alone, barefooted, watering can in one hand and a hard chewy cookie in the other. When I saw a

carriage stop in front of my home I dropped the watering can in the court and hurried into the house in full view of the delegation of ladies who were alighting with the help of a footman.

We do not have bells, but knockers on our doors. "Knock, knock, knock."

I pushed back the curtain from the small peephole in the door. "What do you want?" I asked, chewing on the cookie.

"We want to see the young girl of the house," the foremost woman said in a very sweet voice.

"I am the girl," I said, still chewing and not opening the door.

"Open the door, dearie," she coaxed. "You seem like a nice child."

Suddenly the awful thought struck me that I was grown up—that these women were suitors! "I'm not ready—for that!" I cried, dropping the curtain and retreating to the back of the house. "Go to another home, please. It is not time for me!"

NAJMEH NAJAFI, *Persia is my Heart*

Low Tone

Would you assume the lover's part,
A fig for sighs and tragic start!
With sly, insinuating leer
Approach, and whisper in her ear:
Lord bless me, sir! I vow—protest—
Well, really—you—you guess the rest.
Tol de rol—you guess the rest.

GEORGE COLMAN, *Love in the East*

Stony Answer

Apropos! Talking of vulgarity, I have had a proposal of marriage since I saw you from Mr. Blore the stone mason who keeps a shop in Piccadilly. Parker says it is all my fault for being so humble and civil to everybody.

HARRIETTE WILSON, *Memoirs*

Begging the Question

" I am not now to learn," replied Mr Collins, with a formal wave of the hand, " that it is usual with young ladies to reject the address of the man whom they secretly mean to accept."

JANE AUSTEN, *Pride and Prejudice*

" I wonder why he thought Miss Wolsey would accept him," said Miss Burke.

" Well, most men think that about someone and find they are right."

I. COMPTON-BURNETT, *Mother and Son*

The time I've lost in wooing,
In watching and pursuing
The light that lies
In woman's eyes,
Has been my heart's undoing.

THOMAS MOORE

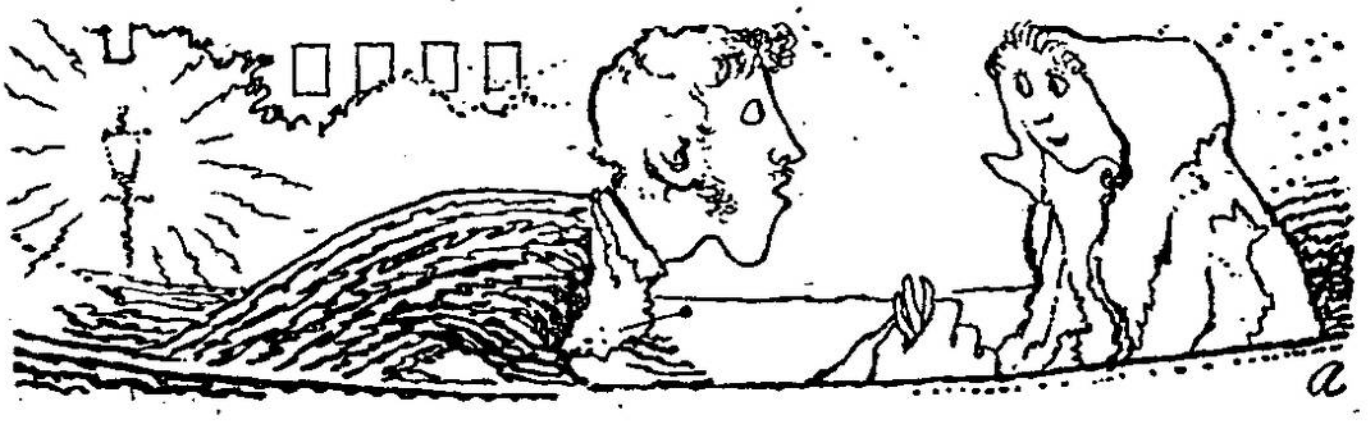
Trotting It Out

It was in this brougham that I received my first proposal of marriage. I had offered Alec Hurley, who lived in the next street to us, a lift home from the Holborn Empire. Alec, later a well-known Cockney singer, was then a good-looking youth of nineteen or so, and had just made his first small hit.

As we rolled eastwards, I sensed by his long awkward pauses and laboured breathing that he was nerving himself to say something portentous, and at last out it came. Grasping my hand, he breathed with hoarse fervour: " Ada, s'welp me Gawd, I love yer! Gawd strike me dead, I do . . . I carn't 'elp it."

My first feeling, I am afraid, was one of disappointment . . . Not thus had the gilded heroes of the Victorian melodramas been wont to declare their affection!

ADA REEVE, *Take It for a Fact*



RETURN OF THE WOLF

The fierce howl came from the mountains turning the spring night cold

BY EDMUND GILLIGAN

UNTIL that moment, there hadn't been a wolf killed in the Catskill Mountains for a hundred years. Now she lay dead in the first snowfall. They had trapped her because she had been at the sheep back in the Notch. So they said. Two bullets had finished her off. Down she sagged, all alone.

"She's a wolf all right." This assurance came from Dan Killane, head sawyer at the lumber mill, who was partner with Appleby in the flock of sheep. He bent over the trap, his hands gripped together behind him in that odd way he had of standing, his eyes taking in everything by green, foxy glances here and there. The others knew Dan was trying to make sure of things by gabbing. They didn't want to rile him by saying anything, whether they agreed or not. They just stared at the wolf.

What was the matter? This: since there hadn't been a wolf in the hills for such a time, who there could tell a wolf from a wild dog? Suppose a big sheepdog had crossed with a wolf of the Adirondacks, where there's plenty of wolves? None of them could say for sure. They weren't the kind that went trapesing around to zoos. And a picture in a book is no great help. To tell the truth, a wolf was just an idea with most of them. So big, so coloured, a music-maker on winter nights, and, of course, a sheep-killer.

Her howling had convinced them. And that's odd, too. How was it they knew the wolf's howl, if they'd never heard such music? "Hear him now? He's working over towards Mount Tobias." That's what they had said when first the long cry sounded. But they couldn't know for sure that it was her howling they had heard. For all they knew, a real wolf was in there Maybe she was running with him, his mate, and keeping her silence the way wild dogs do.

Now they took her out of the trap and flung her under an oak blow-down Somebody said it was quite a rich hide to leave to

rot. "Wolf pelts are no good at all. Can't do anything with them." Johnny Appleby's father said that, and he was something of a trapper, especially in the beaver houses. It was he and Dan Killane who had got up the wolf hunt, they being partners in the sheep two years now.

Johnny himself was standing a bit aloof from them. He was just turned fourteen, yellow-haired like his father, and almost as tall. A funny thing about the two of them, father and son: they had the same rich fleck of freckles across their long noses, and the freckles never faded, winter or summer. Johnny was a skilled tracker in the woods, too. The Game Warden had helped him, teaching him this and that since he was a kid.

Johnny had shot the wolf at his father's nod. One bullet in the heart, one in the brain. They had called on the right boy, a steady hand doing what it had to do, even while the trapped eyes looked quietly at him. Johnny had said, "Of course, Dad. Stand away, all."

They started for the Appleby farm to finish the job off properly with a glass of cider. "Come on," said Appleby, with a laugh, "I'll show you my cellar—as they say up in Maine. You coming, Johnny?"

"No, Dad. I think maybe a fox might come down to see what this is."

So they left him there, very thoughtful. He was thoughtful because he knew she was no wolf. He knew more than the others because he had taken the trouble once to go to the animal farm up the Hudson—a kind of zoo—and study a wolf in its cage. He had spent hours there, and he could understand how some people might think this one in the trap was a wolf. Her head was wolfish and her brush, too. And she had the grey wolf colours, except for a slight reddishness in certain places.

Two things, he knew for sure, were not wolfish: the legs, which were fine and long, and the eyes, which were those of a dog. A dog gone wrong, no doubt. Kicked away from many a door and living off rabbits. And Johnny had other evidence even more convincing. He knew that wolves didn't look quietly at men—and hopefully—the way she had looked at him when he raised his rifle.

"Some wolf in her, maybe. But more dog." That's what he said, bending over her.

He began a wide circling round the stained place. He started off, came back, and pried her jaws open. "I thought so." He found rabbit fur between her teeth, and not a sign of wool. He straightened up and he took it easy because he had a strange impression that something was watching him from the thickets.

" Good old dog," he said to the dead one, " were you all alone? "

He trudged back into his circling, started climbing towards the ridge, turned into the quiet cedars. Three grouse that were budding there took off, thrumming hard. He hit into the snow again, found the track of a fox on a grouse stalk, and then—no doubt of it—the big, splashy dog-marks she had made. These turned back on themselves. He followed until the tracks stopped near another blow-down. When the big tracks turned out again, another track showed in the snow. This was smaller and it was following hers.

Johnny didn't follow. He completed his circle round the trap. Nothing had gone out, except the fox, dragging something, and three or four deer—these last in a big hurry. He sat down between two rocks and under a cover of sumac, keeping his eyes on the dead one. Some big flakes shifted down. Pretty soon he heard the voice he expected: a little voice complaining.

He heard a whimper. Part-hidden in the whirling snow, something half the size of a fox appeared, creeping onward, belly down, ears up. On it came, showing much skill from cover to cover, until in a barking rush it jumped to the dead one's side. One thrust of the tiny nose was enough to smell out the truth: what had been alive and rich with milk was now dead and cold. The newcomer lifted its muzzle and began to cry.

" Hey, pup! " Johnny just sat still and smiled and waved his hand. The mourner never looked round. He kept on crying. That was a good sign to Johnny because it was doggy. He walked over and knelt in the snow by the puppy. Never looked at him. You'd have thought Johnny himself was mourning.

After a while, Johnny sat down in the snow and took out a sandwich. He began munching; also he kept saying things in a low voice. Just anything at all, with a side-glance now and then. The puppy was a beauty, strong, thick-coated, big-footed. He hadn't the grey colour of his dam. He was a reddish brown.

The puppy couldn't really make it out, couldn't believe there was no milk for him. He began nudging her to wake her up. At last he drew away. Johnny gave him a bit of bread. He snapped it up and let it go. He looked shrewdly at Johnny's mouth—busy on meat and bread—and tried again to work things out. He set his paws on Johnny's knee and lifted his head for a better view of Johnny's eyes. The puppy wasn't used to such eyes, all the same, he knew enough to give them attention. Other eyes—hers—had looked at him in this kindly, loving way.

Johnny scratched the pup behind the ear. He thrust his little finger into the ear and tickled him. The pup began licking Johnny's other hand. " How about your brothers? Lose them

too?" The puppy wagged his tail. Johnny said, "What you need, stranger, is warm milk, and I'm just the boy that can bring you to it. The best."

He opened his jacket, thrust the pup into shelter there, and went off to the farm and into the main barn, warm with the breath of staring Herefords. The end of the hay-bay had been boarded off, and a fine dog-house of baled hay built there.

"You in there, Bess?"

The sheepdog—that's what they called her, anyway—answered that she was at home all right, but very busy. Johnny came up close and looked into her house. There she lay, her three pups taking supper. "I've another customer for you, Bess. How about it, old girl?"

Bess had already snuffed in the good news. She nodded.

"Ah!" said Johnny, "you can tell a dog from a wolf, can't you? Here—wash him down a bit." He put the pup halfway into her bed. She called him all the way, gave him a few licks along his snow-streaked back, and invited him to supper. The other diners gave the new one only the briefest glances, they were so busy.

Johnny sat there awhile to see if Bess would change her mind. He knew she had one. Not that she was a great herder of sheep. No, there wasn't much call for that sort of work—tending them in the fields and so on. She just had it in her to drive them well enough when she was asked to do it.

About six months later, Johnny's father was in the harness room looking over their trout rods and dressing the lines. He was fixing up a brace of wet flies for opening day when Johnny came in with a box of earth-worms, very fat and grumpy. "That's the boy," he said, picking out a worm to watch it wriggle, "they'll take no nonsense from the trout, eh?"

"Where are you planning to fish, Dad?"

"I thought we'd hit the Saw Kill first and see if the fish are working." He put the worm back into the box and, with a sudden change of tone to sternness, asked, "I thought you said Bess had only three pups? I took her up to the Notch to take a look at the sheep and four pups came along with her—if you can call them pups now."

"How are the sheep, Dad?"

"They wintered right well. Dan Killane and I counted six hundred. Lambing's over, and I don't think we lost more than two or three ewes all winter long. Killed or not—I don't know. We took fifty down."

"Who's 'we,' Dad?"

" Well—Bess, of course. Say, she gave that big pup an awful thrashing when he ran the lambs too hard."

" Can he count sheep like she can? "

" No, but I saw him trying. Johnny, I hope and pray that this sheep business will pay off again. It's got to. Got to." His face darkened when he thought of the money he had risked on the sheep. It was a big venture for a man who didn't know much about them. He put on a good smile for his son. " Now, did you answer me about those pups? "

" I didn't, Dad, but I will now. That big one called Seeker, he's no dog. He's a wolf." He shook his head quickly to show that he was just fooling.

His father put down a reel very carefully. " I won't ask you to say it over again, Johnny, because I heard you plain enough. So he isn't Bess's? "

" Not exactly." He told him how he had saved the puppy and why he kept it secret. " I put him under cover now and then, when I saw you scratching your head over them in the barn. And when Dan Killane was around. Specially then."

" You say you knew his mother was a dog, too. Yet you fired the shots, Johnny."

" I do what I'm told."

" She had only one? "

" I made sure. She did well enough to keep even one. I expect she lost the others to the wildcats. Or the foxes."

" No den to hide them. They say those wild dogs don't den up, even when they mate with wolves." He picked up the reel and tried its click. " Do what you're told now—will you? "

" Yes, sir."

" He's your dog. Not your wolf. Your dog." He couldn't help frowning at his own thought. " I'm sorry, son, I asked you to shoot a dog. Dogs have been on our side an awful long time now, and we must stand by them. This one—Seeker, you say?—he has some sheep sense in him. Old Bess has found that out by herself. She's getting on in years—twelve's a long time for a dog—and she's looking for a helper in the autumn drive maybe, although I don't think I'll risk her there this time. Well, lock the others up, Johnny, when there's sheep around, and let Bess teach him what she can."

" All right, Dad. Why did she thrash Seeker? "

" Well, it was my fault, Johnny. He was for taking them down the lumber road, the way I said. But she wanted them on Sheep Trail—the old one—same as last year. Easier going. So she taught him to obey her—not me." He laughed at this recollection of her bossing the job. " One other thing, Johnny—we'll keep

this to ourselves. Tell your mother. Nobody else. There's an awful lot of wolf ' experts ' in this valley. Used to be one myself, in fact."

On the opening day of the trout season, Johnny and his father came up from Saw Kill with two creels of trout, mostly small, but one, a brown, that went over fourteen inches. Coming through the main orchard, they saw Bess and Seeker in the meadow below the sheep-pen. Seeker wasn't quite a year old, but he had caught up with her in size. He didn't look much like her, except for his reddish colour which had deepened. His jaws were longer than hers. He had something else she lacked: the peculiar shuffling gait of the true sheepdog.

The father was saying Seeker walked like a bear when they saw somebody humping through the orchard at a great rate. He was calling out to them. " Dan Killane," said Johnny.

" What's he come about, I wonder? " Johnny's father took a few steps towards the orchard. He was close enough then to see something better in Killane's wedgy face. " We've made some money, Johnny. I can tell the money look on him a mile away."

Even so, Killane had his eyes to serve him. He had one foot in the orchard and the other in the lane when he saw the sheep doing what they were told to do by Seeker, who shuffled about, muttering, and shaking his big head. Bess had walked the sheep out to the far corner of the meadow, had told them to stay there, and had called Seeker to the job. He had taken over in solemn style and she sat down to watch him.

The sheep wanted to get back to the pen in the worst way. Now and then a ewe would break away, her lambs trotting by her. Sometimes Seeker would head off the ewe. While Killane was looking on, full of wonder at something, Seeker chose a lamb and drove it back. Soon as the lamb bawled, the ewe went back to the flock again.

Killane couldn't keep back his good news. " You want to sell everything in the Notch come winter? C.O.D.? " Seeing the answering smile, he added, " Martin will take them before snowfall." He grinned, too. " So we made out all right, after all."

" So we did."

" The market price—whatever it is then—and three cents over. Cash the day we deliver. O.K. with you, is it? "

" It's O.K. with me, Dan, if it's O.K. with you. And I don't mind telling you, it gets me out of a hole." This notion always cheered Appleby up, and he began to talk—very lively and yet strained—about the Notch and the way he had studied it because he had heard about the old days when two thousand sheep had been kept in the Notch, a great bowl in the hills with four fine

springs, so clear that watercress grew thick, and a good Scottish grass planted by a shepherd generations ago. " How about a trout supper to celebrate, Dan? Johnny and I did well for the opening day."

" Just a minute." Killane turned a keen look down at his boots, just as if they had something big to tell him. He then put on an empty air, a signal that he was up to something. " What dog's that tending them sheep so smart? "

" Johnny's."

" Well, so it is." This was quick and mean and empty. By it, he hinted: I know you're hiding something from me. And I'll find out what it is presently. He asked, " What's old Bess doing—looking at him like that? "

" Teaching him, I guess. Didn't you see her thrash him up in the Notch? Same dog."

" Why, so I did. Indeed, yes." Killane glanced at him with sudden intentness. Then he spoke in a very low tone to Johnny, " That's an awful lot of dog you got there. Bigger'n old Bess, isn't he? " This was to force Johnny into speech that wouldn't hide anything. Johnny's father took over.

" Bess nursed that one for us along with the others. Looked him over and adopted him nice as pie. Now you want to know who gave us that pup in the first place? "

" What? " Killane seemed astonished. " Why no, Jack. What business is it of mine who gave you a pup? " He glanced at them with such a show of innocence that they knew he meant: I know damn well you've got the son of that wolf there, and I'm going to see him killed before long.

About ten o'clock that night—the moon so new you could hardly make it out—Killane went home, and Johnny and his father stood in the yard waiting for the pump to start in the house well. Mrs. Appleby had said it sounded odd and maybe needed greasing again. Well, the pump started and stopped in good tune, and they were still there, talking about trout, when all of a sudden there came hollering down the mountainside a wolfish howling worse than the howling they had heard the winter before. Its fierceness turned the spring night cold.

" Johnny, what do you make that out to be? "

" Never heard it before. It's awful, isn't it, Dad? It's worse than the noise she made." He meant the dead dog in last winter's snow. A second call came, all in one piece, a long howl echoing harsh under the blue-stone ledges by Ram Kill, which flowed out of the Notch springs.

Johnny said, " It must be a wolf this time, Dad. A real one, drifting down from the north country."

This new anxiety silenced them. They went into the house and to bed.

Near the main barn, a pair of eyes caught the scanty moonlight and gleamed. This was Seeker, roused off his watch by that creature calling and threatening. He snuffed the wind. The strange scent in it made him tremble with fury. His thick ruff rose. When the call came again, he growled. His big teeth glittered in a snarl. When the howl pealed stronger than ever, he ran into the meadow.

There he let loose a challenging note he had never sounded before, the ancient challenge of the true dog to the true wolf. At the fiercer answer, he ran into the orchard, sprang to the ridge, and faced the Notch. Out of it the wind flowed rank with a scent that stirred his instinctive love for man and for man's flocks.

When Johnny came home from school the next day, he left his books on the porch, took down his rod, and tramped away for another whack at the trout. When he came back, this time with only two fish, there were loud voices and lights in the harness room. He pushed open the door. His father and Killane were there with the Game Warden, a grey-haired man, a little on the plump side, but with lots of power to get over the ridges, which he did fast enough when trouble called.

On a pair of grain sacks, flung on the floor, were two torn lambs and a fawn, a nice one, too. "Killed in the Notch today, Johnny," said his father. "Our lambs. And the fawn—just this side of the lower spring."

"And nobody knows what done it," said Killane, "and nobody's saying."

"Aren't you saying?" Johnny spoke to the Warden at once because he saw anxiety in those kindly eyes.

"That's how wolves kill. For the fun of it. When the kill is handy," said the Warden. "I've seen that in Canada—fawns ripped the same way. And I heard that howling last night—same as you did, Johnny—and I agree with you. It's like the wolf talk I heard in Ontario long ago. Two more lambs were eaten. No clear tracks that I could find."

Killane made his play cleverly. He grinned all round and said, "One thing sure, Jack—now you listen to me, Warden, because it's a lot of money we've got coming to us—we ought to set a man and a tough dog over them sheep. It'll cost a few dollars, maybe, but the old cabin in the Notch is in good shape for living. And we've got to deliver them sheep before snowfall. What do you say to that, Johnny?"

" I'll do it myself," said Johnny's father. " Bring Seeker in and we'll let the Warden size him up. Seeker's the boy for this. Bess is too old now. And he's got the jaws for it."

Johnny went out to the hay-bay and called Seeker. Bess was lying there with the other three, her children. She got up stiffly. Johnny went out of the door at the silo. He whistled a strict signal for Seeker to come to heel. He walked as far as the sheep-pen and whistled again. He turned back to the harness room and said, " Seeker's gone."

" How gone? " His father asked the question roughly, a sign of quick anxiety.

" Don't you let him run now and then, Johnny? " asked the Warden. " Maybe he's in the orchard or—"

" No, sir. He doesn't want to run alone and he'd never go off the place without me. So he's gone for good."

His father said, " It was a wolf howling last night and that's what sent him off. Why? "

Killane shook his head in mock sorrow over this loss. He spoke in a whisper like a shy boy, " Well, Jack—well, Johnny, maybe you'd better tell the Warden who it was gave you poor Seeker." He sent a pitying glance down to the lambs. " Could be—couldn't it?—Seeker's just gone home? For a visit to the old folks? " He meant them to understand he had found out the moment he had seen Seeker shuffling around the sheep. He put a lot of venom into that crack about a visit to the old folks—he meant the wolves.

Johnny's father tried to tell the story of the trapped dam. Johnny began it first and told it quite calmly, despite the tremble he couldn't keep off his lips.

The Warden said, " Don't take on so, Johnny. We can do something about it." He considered awhile. " If a wolf bitch has drifted down from the north—from the Adirondacks—it don't necessarily mean Seeker's going to run with her. There's sheepdog in him and they don't stand for wolves."

" I've already decided what to do," said Killane, playing his trump card. " I saw that Seeker at noon today. After you two had gone down. He was drinking from the top spring in the Notch. All bloodied up he was—from eating lambs."

Johnny's heart sank.

" I intend," said Killane, " to trap that wolf with the same scent his mother came to. Then I'll hang him."

Johnny's father stayed in the Notch three days. Once or twice in the night, he'd get up, sing out to the sheep, and fire a shot. Three times, Killane fired in broad daylight at something skulking along the ledges.

When school closed, Johnny took over the watch and stayed most of the summer in the Notch, tending the sheep and hoping for a sign of Seeker. Sometimes he whistled the old call, or climbed the ridge and called Seeker, but he had been told to fire shots at night and, at last, he decided that Seeker wouldn't stand for the shooting, even if he was nearby. Soon the ewes were kicking their lambs away—weaning them in their own fashion.

Only once, in September, did something happen. Johnny was tossing a fly into a pool, and taking a brook trout now and then for his supper, when there came an awful roaring and snarling from near Sheep Trail. The first thing he knew, a bunch of sheep scampered out of the sumac and one ewe just sailed out in a crazy jump and broke her neck on the edge of the pool. The snarling and screeching in the thicket kept up for a while. Later, Johnny found a lamb killed, the mossy earth torn up, and blood on the sumac.

When he went out of the Notch to see his mother, he took Sheep Trail, which started above the pools and passed through a big stand of pines—more than a mile—and then under the shelter of overhanging ledges for over three miles. There it struck into another big stand of pine and ran, well sheltered, all the way to the valley. He found nothing on the trail, except three places where rabbits had been killed and eaten. He studied these places, looked in vain for clear tracks, and called again for Seeker.

On the day after the first snowfall—this was a Saturday—he joined his father who was with the sheep, getting ready for the drive-out in a day or two. On the way home, they came across the tracks of men. These turned out to be Killane and two of his friends who had been at the first trapping. When Johnny's father said there were no tracks in the snow and no sheep missing, Killane answered sourly, " Covered up. Gobbled up."

These fellows set a trap the next day, and there came four rifle shots, then four more, very quick, from the edge of the forest. The Warden came up from his farm, and Johnny and his father fell in behind him. They could hear Killane yapping in glee when they came to the clearing where the set had been made, this time with the secret scent and a snow-shoe rabbit for good measure. He had padded the teeth of the trap-jaws.

Within ten feet of that very blow-down where Seeker had hidden on the distant day of his mother's death, he now stood at bay, his throat rattling with fury, his teeth and muzzle bloody. His right forepaw had been caught in the trap. He was a sight to behold, a real savage, glaring at Killane.

For a moment, Johnny couldn't believe his own eyes because

Seeker had grown so much in a summer and a fall. He was bigger than his dam had been. His jaws were the jaws of a wild animal, a fighter and a tearer of game. His sleekness was gone. The thick fur at his throat and on his broadened shoulders was matted and slashed.

Killane said, " A wolf by the name of Seeker. Lamb-killer. Hasn't his dam's wolf colour, but he has her spirit all right."

Even in the taunting voice, the word " Seeker " had a meaning for the savage in the trap. The snarling died in his jaws. Johnny took a step forward. The Warden said, " This yours, Johnny? "

" Yes, sir. He's mine. This is Seeker all right. Sure it's Seeker, Warden." At the sound of Johnny's voice, rich in its gentleness, Seeker sank down. He stretched his muzzle in the snow and gazed directly at Johnny, just the way his trusting mother had.

Johnny handed his rifle to his father.

" Going to hang him right here and now, Warden," said Killane. " Don't want to ask Johnny to shoot this one. Oh no! We'll hang him just to make some people a little more careful about harbouring wolves and such."

Seeker lifted his head. His eyes had become yellow with anger. He began gathering his muscles for the rise. Johnny took another step forward. " Well, Seeker, old boy, it's so long now. So long, Seeker! " Seeker thumped his tail.

" Keep off him, Johnny." The Warden then held up his hand in warning to Killane, who had taken out a thick cord. " Not so fast, Dan. Haven't I told you? We don't know yet why he ran away."

Johnny saw drops of blood seeping out of the matted fur at Seeker's throat. Johnny inched forward a little distance. There he bent down to make sure there was a wound.

Killane whirled the noose he had made. This brought Seeker up with a roar. In that instant, Johnny plunged forward, right up against the gaping jaws. He tripped and fell headlong across the trap. The savage in the trap swerved from him and struggled forward to reach Killane.

Johnny put his arm gently round that battered, grimy head. " Seeker, old boy, he's not going to hang you or lay a hand on you. Quiet! "

At this, Seeker fell over with a groan and began licking the hand that lay along his forepaw. Johnny parted the matted fur at the throat. Seeker groaned again. Johnny ran his hand along the shoulder, felt the scars and the half-healed rips.

He turned angrily to the men. " Do the lambs bite him? " He parted the fur over a whitish welt. " And the ewes also? "

He waited until they were quiet. " I'll have the law on anybody that lays a hand on this dog now or any other time. You hear that, Dan Killane? "

Killane had nothing to say. He struck the snowflakes from his eyes. The Warden said, " There's more to this than meets the eye."

Johnny said, " A dog that kills sheep is to be killed by the man who sees him. A dog that runs deer is to be killed by the Warden on proof.. My dog kills no sheep and runs no deer." He took the iron stake of the trap and pried its jaws open. Gently he lifted Seeker's paw. " Not broken." He stood up. " Heel, Seeker! "

Seeker limped forward until his head touched Johnny's knee. " Stand aside, all."

They fell back, and in the next instant, their eyes wide in quick alarm, they shouted, " Hey! . Hey! Look out, Johnny! " Killane laughed shrilly until anger changed his laughter to a curse.

Johnny turned in his stride. His happiness became dismay. He had just one flashing glimpse of Seeker before he glided away in a three-legged gait into the swirling snow back towards the Notch.

Killane was the only one mean enough to say something. " Now that's downright inconsiderate of that Seeker. Well, I should have put poison in that rabbit, but I couldn't. It being against the law." They knew well enough he'd do it next time.

That flurry of snow in the woods became the Big Fall. There were a lot of people who thought it really couldn't snow any more in the Catskills as once it did. They found out. Right then, the big flakes came down so thick that the Warden said it couldn't last.

It lasted until sunset; then a finer fall came down and the whole valley grew quiet. Couldn't hear a dog or a cow. The snow clung to window-panes, climbed them, and fell so thick you couldn't see a light in the houses below.

It was the hush that woke Johnny out of a poor sleep. No wind, no sounds at all, nothing but the shifting slide of snow. He fell asleep. Voices woke him up. He heard his father talking over the telephone. " I'm sorry to hear that. It looks bad, eh? No, we get our money when we deliver the sheep." His mother was downstairs, too. Johnny heard her low voice, comforting his father.

At noon the next day, snow was still falling. At nightfall, six deer showed up in the main orchard. They had come off the

ridges. They began hoofing up windfalls, full of frozen cider. An hour after supper, the snow-plough got through and pushed all the way up to Killane's farm at the edge of the Notch forest. Johnny's mother put on the coffee, and Johnny stopped the plough when it came down. He brought the men in for supper. They looked pretty serious.

Midnight again, and again the quiet of the snow-bound house made any little noise a peal.

Johnny sat up in bed and listened. He heard their voices, one imploring softly, the other saying, " My dear girl, there's no way out of it. I shall be all right, darling." And, " Sheep can live under snow. They're built for it. I'll have that money from Martin yet."

Johnny put on two sets of winter underwear, two woollen shirts, two pairs of dungarees, took his rifle, and went downstairs. His father looked up at him, not in surprise at all, and finished lacing his boots.

" Both of you? " His mother turned from the window, where the snow whispered.

Johnny could tell she was frightened. She had brushed back her pretty red curls, touched up her lips with lipstick, and had a fresh apron over her dressing-gown. That's how she always kept her courage up in times like these. She said, " There's somebody in the orchard. A light coming."

This was Killane. He shook off a hood of snow and came into the kitchen. He looked poorly. " You think we can make it, Jack? "

" On snow-shoes—yes, Dan."

" Even so, what good will it do? "

" I don't know much about sheep, Dan. But I know this much: it's best to be with them now."

Johnny took the knapsack, packed with food, and brought the snow-shoes round to the porch. They started in brisk style, swung up past Killane's place, and reached the lumber road into the Notch.

Johnny said, " How about Sheep Trail? It'll be easier going. Not many drifts there."

His father shook his head. " Easier, yes—but it's longer. Too long."

They started again. What they used to do in an hour took them three. The drifts were tough for greenhorn snow-shoers, the blow-downs worse. In the end, they decided to wait in the shelter of the pines for the sun. They went ahead at the dim break of day, stopping every now and then to listen. A wind was rising and that's all they could hear.

Even when they were stumbling along the creek, they heard nothing else.

Killane stopped. He was gasping.

"You hear anything, Jack?"

At the shake of the other's head, Killane said, "Give them a call, Johnny, will you? Ah, my God! if they're under this—we're done for."

Johnny cupped his gloved hands and shouted. They ran, side by side, and floundered into the clear space, the wide hollow of the Notch. Glittering spouts of flakes blew into the sunlight. Killane plunged in a headlong dash to the first fold, a long shed of logs tucked under the ledges.

"Empty!" He threw off his snow-shoes and struck his hands into a drift. "Hey, sheep! Hey, sheep!" He was half out of his mind.

Johnny jumped the creek, and fought his way into the main shelter, a great cave in the blue-stone, to which wings of logs and an outer roof had been added in the old days. The sheep had been in there not long since. A day, perhaps. Now they were gone, except for a ram, an old-timer, that lay dead in a dark corner.

His father came to the door, his eyes empty, his hands trembling.

"Seeker! I've found him, Johnny. He's dead this time." He didn't seem to care much. "Sheep are fools. Panic. Up the ridge and right over the cliff when he came—that's the story. That's where we'll find them come spring."

Killane was standing by something huddled deep under snow and frost. The first thing Johnny saw was a half-eaten lamb, then the open jaws of its killer, ghastly with gobs of flesh and crystal blood.

Killane was all right about it. He just said, "Well, he didn't kill them all, Johnny. But they're gone."

Johnny scooped the snow away. He kicked off a coat of ice until he saw the strange greyish hide. He thrust his hands into the frozen fur and hauled hard.

The carcass came up an inch, its hair tearing in the blood-darkened ice. He hauled again until the ice broke and the carcass slid up from the drift. He heard them gasp. Its throat was torn up.

"There's your real wolf," he said. "Know one next time, will you? Know now why Seeker ran away from me? To kill wolves—that's why!"

Johnny turned in horror from the wolf, cupped his hands, and

shouted into the storm, " Seeker! Seeker, where are you? " After that: " He's afraid we'll shoot him."

The men said nothing. They were too far gone in grief and exhaustion. For an hour longer, they ranged hopelessly through the drifts. They gave up for a while and came into the cabin to save themselves from the cold.

Johnny lit the lamps, made a fire, and put the kettle on for tea. They rested until noon.

The snow still falling, they climbed as far as they could up the ridge, looking for signs of sheep. They failed, pushed back to the cabin, rested an hour, and started the homeward journey the way they had come up. The snow stopped while they were in the first stand of pine. Yet the drifts slowed them up again, and night caught them at the edge of the woods. Soon the half moon shone clear.

Johnny's father wouldn't let Killane go to his house, where he lived alone.

" Come along, Dan. Stay the night. We'll be needing company. Both of us." His voice broke. " If only we had known about that snow . . ."

They came up through the orchard. The Warden's truck was near the barn, its engine running. He was in the cab, keeping warm. He said, " Tell your mother you're back safe, Johnny. That's something. She's been worried."

Johnny took off his snow-shoes and turned towards the house. He saw the deer in the orchard. The moonlight made their eyes shine bright. Suddenly, clear as could be, he heard a dog bark there. The deer whooped away. A wide heave of snow rolled forward under the farther trees. Next he saw other eyes, right down in the snow, and gleaming under the bare, glistening boughs.

His heart stood still a moment and then it began to thump hard and sweet with hope and joy. He ran into the drifts. He heard a crazy clamour of bleats and cries. A hundred more eyes glittered.

Then, in a wide rush, the whole flock swarmed into the lanes of the orchard, each sheep a jumping bush of snow, each one crying and springing towards the lights of the barns.

He ran towards his father, crying his name. The three men, heads turned in the same stiff, staring way, couldn't even move a step. The sheep flowed around them and past them. Johnny ran to the main door of the shed and pushed it open.

" Hey, sheep! Hey, sheep! "

The leaders trotted in. Rams and ewes and lambs, they pushed into the warmth and the mellow light of the shed, pressed

into the corners, huddled, and began to settle down. Behind the last one, a young ram whose horns glittered like icicles when he capered, there came Seeker, shuffling along like a little brown bear. The ram was all for a romp in the moonlight. Seeker wanted none of that. He came up to the ram and began muttering. The ram obediently trotted into the shed. Johnny closed the door.

Seeker sat down in the snow, his tail thumping. Johnny went down on his knees before him, took the scarred head between his hands, and looked into the eyes gazing the way a dog always gazes. Right at you.

"Drove them on Sheep Trail, Seeker? The way old Bess taught you? When the snow got too bad for them?"

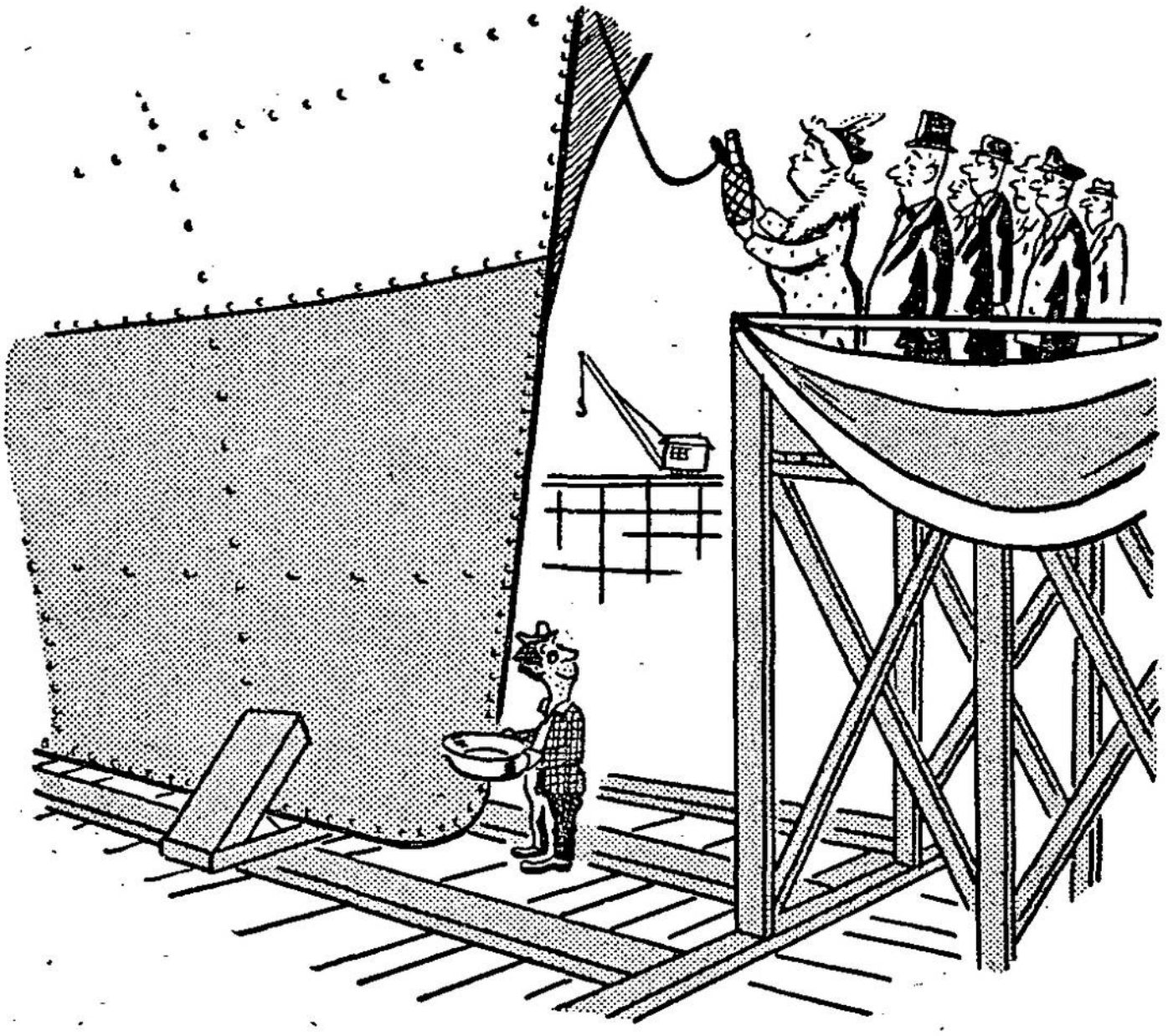
Seeker nodded.

"Caught that wolf with his mouth full of lamb, did you? That why you left me?"

Seeker nodded again and limped a little nearer.

"And now what do you want, my dog?"

Seeker thrust forward into Johnny's arms.



A PATRICK PETRELLA STORY

INFORMER X

" Someone put the finger on us," he said
" I'm wondering who "

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

THE Prophet appeared on an evening of late summer. He drifted along the sun-warmed pavement of the High Street, dressed in the remains of five good suits clobbered together with string. His beard, which veiled the area between his lower lip and his top waistcoat button, was the colour of badly worn snow. Across his shoulder he bore a staff, to the upper end of which was tacked a disk of plywood. On one side, red letters on black said: *Smite and Spare not.* On the obverse was *Suffer Little Children*, in yellow on blue.

The Prophet was suffering little children. A small group was following him, open-mouthed, up the pavement. Every few minutes he would stop to address them, and the children would retreat. They were not out to annoy him. They were just waiting for him to do something.

Detective Constable Patrick Petrella was on his way to keep an appointment when he saw the Prophet. Like all detectives, he had his own private, hardly acquired, scrupulously guarded, never-to-be-mentioned list of informers. Useful contacts; some in the underworld, some on the fringes of it, some quite respectable, but with a talent for meddling or a spiteful mind. A few of them sold information coldly, for money. But the payment was so small and the risks were so great that some more complex motive than greed must have been at work in their dark minds.

So that he should never slip into mentioning their real names, Petrella spoke and wrote and thought of them by nicknames. There was the one-legged paper-seller—Peg-leg—and the big

tawny doorman at the local cinema—Leo; and there was the Bird. The Bird was the best of the lot, the only one so far who had never let him down.

It was the Bird he was meeting that evening at ten o'clock in a cul-de-sac off the less-frequented end of the High Street. If the Bird was willing to sing both loudly and clearly, then it was possible—just possible—that a nasty little collection of thugs, who wore black pantomime masks and carried fish-hooks in their cuffs and called themselves the Cats, might be put where they belonged for a year or two.

The Cats were specialists in shop robbery. They attacked old women in backstreet shops, the sort that stay open until all hours. Small dark shops in small dark streets, which often have a surprising amount of money in the till.

He was in plenty of time. The gate in the wall had been left unpadlocked and he eased it open, slipped through, and shut it behind him. It was a small timber yard, on the slope that ran down to the railway, and it was well situated for such meetings.

Good contacts could never be hurried. Petrella spread out his raincoat and sat down on it. He had spent some hours the previous evening with a nice old lady who had had her face pulled open by the Cats' claws, and for a chance of getting back at them he was prepared to wait a long time.

An occasional electric train curled by, sparking up out of the mist, oddly silent, teetered on the points, and disappeared like a cheerful ghost under the road bridge where the High Street crossed the line. Petrella lit his pipe. An increase of noise on the other side of the fence suggested that the pubs were shutting.

It was at about this time that the landlord of the Feathers looked at his clock and made a sign to his assistant. It meant: "Any trouble, you slip out and fetch a policeman." The assistant edged towards the serving-door.

"Now, gentlemen," said the landlord. "For the third and last time . . ."

There were five of them at the table in the window. The one they called Len was perhaps thirty. He had a hard, white, Londoner's face, sloe-black eyes, and a lack of expression that was more frightening than the animation of the four youngsters with him. They were all drinking whisky. Even Jimmy Middleton who hardly looked his sixteen years.

"Don't you hear the gentleman, Len? He says it's time."

"See if you can get another round, Jimmy," suggested Len.

The boy gathered up the five thin glasses in his right hand, a finger in each, and drew them together with a crack. Holding them so, he walked to the counter, stretched out his hand, and

opened it. The glasses clattered down on the polished wood. For a moment after he had dropped them, his hand remained, the fingers bent, like a big claw.

" Same again, chum," he said.

" It's ten minutes past time now."

" Len," said the boy over his shoulder. " Gentleman says no."

" Ask him if he wants that luvverly new window of his pushed in," said Len. " Tell him I might lean against it on the way out." Where the others had drunk themselves gay, he had drunk himself quiet and ugly.

The landlord looked quickly over his shoulder, and his assistant ducked through the door. But Len saw him go.

He climbed to his feet, walked across to the bar, and said, " The boy-friend's gone for help? All right. Don't bother about that drink. We'll put it on the slate this time."

He shook his sleeve, then drew his hand twice, firmly, across the bar counter. The landlord was still staring at the cross, cut a clean inch into the polished wood, when the door slammed behind the last of the boys. He wiped his forehead with the beer cloth, and breathed out deeply.

On the pavement the little army gathered itself together.

" Blow me down," said Jimmy, " there's that Prophet. We oughter do something about that beard of his. Can't be healthy. What say we trim it for him, Len? "

He broke off. Len wasn't looking at the Prophet. His eyes were on a spot in the shadows, ten yards along the pavement. He moved quickly. The woman looked over her shoulder, seemed half inclined to run for it, then stopped.

Len walked right up to her. She stepped backwards, into the deep doorway of a shop. Len continued to advance until his face was almost touching hers. " Who've you been drinking with tonight? " he said.

" I never."

" Soon as my back's turned, you're out of the house boozing with some pretty boy."

" I came out to buy some cigarettes."

" Who've you been with? "

" I haven't been with anyone." Her head was twisting from side to side, hopelessly. She was not looking for help. She was nerving herself for what was to come.

A sudden, wicked, stinging slap on the side of the face. Then another. She shook her head. There was a small, dark drop of blood where Len's ring had cut her cheek open.

" Are you going to talk? " said Len. " Or do you want I should use the knuckles on you? "

" Leave that woman alone," said a deep voice. The Prophet loomed in the doorway.

Len looked up. The madness slowly left him. " You go and chase yourself," he said. " She's my wife. I can talk to her if I want."

" I say you shall not strike her," said the Prophet.

" Fix him," said Len, shortly.

It was a good fight, while it lasted. One against five is long odds, but the Prophet had a staff and knew how to use it. His first scything movement cut the nearest boy's legs from under him, and his second put Jimmy Middleton backwards into a shop window. After that he used the point. When the police arrived and the boys scattered, he was still on his feet.

Petrella, aroused by the sound of breaking glass, had climbed onto a crate and watched the proceedings over the fence. He saw no reason to interfere. When it was all over he collected his raincoat, came softly out, and went home to bed. He realized that it was no use waiting any longer for the Bird that night.

The Cats hung out in a loft above a junk store in Parson Street. It was a good place for them because it had six different ways in and out. And they knew them all. Here Len dispensed justice and wisdom to his followers. Sober, he was something of a tactician. Under his rule the Cats had learnt to steal only money And to spend it steadily, not in sudden, suspicious bouts of affluence. He had taught them that the clinching argument was a blow. You go in, he said, and you ask for sutthink that costs a few bob and you give 'em a pound note, see? That means they got to open the till. Right? Then you smash 'em, grab what's in the till, and beat it. No clever stuff.

Under his guidance they had prospered. Until recently.

Then came the carefully planned, combined operation against a larger shop, with a manager and two girl assistants, which might have been black disaster. At the very last moment, warned by some underground sense, Len had called it off. He had then scouted round by himself, and spotted the police tender parked behind the hoarding across the way.

He had also seen something else. A John the Baptist, in beard and rags, motionless at the end of the street.

" Someone put the finger on us," he said. " And I'm wondering just who."

" Must have been that flickering Prophet," said one of them.

" Could be," said Len. " Might have been young Jimmy."

They looked up to see if he was joking; his face was expressionless as a washed dish. " Why would it be Jimmy? "

" I didn't say it was," said Len. " I said it might be. He's friends with that dick, ent he? I seen 'em talking the other day He's so young he doesn't think what he's saying, perhaps."

Jimmy Middleton came in at this moment. He usually took the route across the roof and through the skylight because he was still young enough to enjoy climbing for its own sake. This time he was in a hurry, so he came up through the trapdoor.

" I did what you said," he explained. " I watched the back door and slipped by when the old woman— "

" Cut the narrative," said Len. " Tell us what you found."

Jimmy, deflated, said, " You know all that old clobber he wears, rags and pieces. Well, he's got a nice suit in his wardrobe. And shirts and shoes and socks. And—and something else."

He held his right hand out and they crowded round him. It was the last, the ultimate argument. A small old-fashioned blue-plated automatic pistol.

" And it's loaded," said Jimmy.

" I'd better look after that," said Len. No one demurred. He slipped it into his pocket. " What's your idea about this geezer, Jimmy? "

" I think he's a copper," said Jimmy. " You know—a ghost. Someone they've planted here."

There was an uneasy silence in the loft. It was exactly as if a shadow had stalked across the room.

" What say we lie low for a bit, Len? " said one of the boys.

" Nuts," said Len. The weight in his pocket gave him confidence. " He's no copper He's a cheap stoolie. When I'm finished with him he'll wish he was back wherever it was he came from. First thing, we want to find out what he's up to. Right? We take it in turns. One of us watch him all the time. Use your loaf. Keep out of sight. We'll soon see what he's at. Then we can fix him."

If the Prophet knew that he was being watched, he gave no sign of it. Most of his day he spent, as before, drifting quietly along the pavements of Pound End and Highside, going no farther north than the Main Circular Road, sometimes dropping south as far as the railway terminals and goods depots of Sonning Town. But most of the time he spent with the children, and they, with the instinct of the streets, seemed to realize that he meant them no harm. Hour after hour they would follow him, an early and unusual Father Christmas, carrying no sack of toys, but big with infinite possibilities of mystery

" He talks to them," said Petrella.

" As long as he only talks," said big Sergeant Gwilliam.

" The Matron of the Highside Children's Home got a bit

worried at first. He hangs round them a lot. But from what I can make out he does no harm."

"Loitering with intent?"

Petrella considered the matter, but shook his head. Although, as a policeman, he had a well-founded distrust of any unknown character who hung about for long doing nothing, this didn't make sense. "There's nothing to steal," he said. "The place is just full of kids and beds and bedpans—"

"Different thing five years ago when it was a private house. Old Sir Louis Borderer. Then it *would* have been worth a go."

Petrella cast his mind back. "He was the collector, wasn't he? Dead some years now. A lot of his stuff went to a museum."

"That's right," said Sergeant Gwilliam. "It was before my time. I was in South London then. Why?"

"Was there ever a burglary there? A big one?"

"I expect so," said Gwilliam. "There was plenty worth stealing. Records would be able to tell you. Why?"

"Just an idea," said Petrella.

Sergeant Gwilliam looked at him suspiciously. He distrusted young detective constables who got ideas. Petrella went off to look for the Bird, who had been somewhat elusive lately. He had a feeling that some useful information might by now be forthcoming from that source.

The Matron at Highside Children's Home was a single-minded extrovert. A daily life spent in grappling with Local Authorities, keeping together an underpaid staff, and composing the difficulties of a hundred children left her with little time for reflection.

There came a time in every day, though. The last half-hour before she sought her own bed; when her charges were asleep, and the telephone had stopped wrangling. She liked to spend it out in the summer-house. It was a beautiful little baroque temple, lovingly transported, stone by stone, from its native Arezzo by the enthusiastic Sir Louis as a wedding present for his third wife. In it he had placed, as a sort of table, a pediment of great antiquity, unearthed at Capua: a heavy square of old, hewn stone. On it the Matron would place her knitting-bag, her spare glasses, and her evening newspaper. Beside it she erected her deck-chair.

Her thoughts, as usual, were on the problems of the day. That funny old man. She was inclined to believe the children when they said he meant no harm. Sometimes he talks to us, Lizzie Ferrers had said. Sometimes he asks us questions. What about? Oh, anything. Getting-up time. Mealtimes. Bedtime. The routine of the home. Very odd, thought the Matron

Looking up, she saw him. Clear, in the bright moonlight. Then he was gone. He had dodged in among the trees on the far side of the lawn.

Her first thought was to go back and ring for the police. Being a resolute woman, she decided to wait for a moment, and watch. The back door of the summer-house led directly to the garden door of the house and there was no chance of being cut off. And there was something else, too. The Matron had spent part of her professional life in a home for old people, and as the Prophet came out again into the moonlight at the edge of the trees, she noticed that he was holding himself and moving like a man of half his age.

The next thing she saw was that he was not alone. There were flitting figures behind him, among the trees. Three—no, four men following him. She decided that it was time to move.

As she turned, the attack developed. Two men flung themselves at the Prophet, who whirled to meet them. A twisting knot of figures went to the ground with a thud that could be heard clear across the intervening distance.

As the Matron panted up to the garden door, she received a further shock. A police car was already coming up the drive. Sergeant Gwilliam jumped from it before it had stopped.

"They're over there." She pointed. "Fighting. Quick, and you'll get them."

"They won't get out without wings," said the Sergeant. "We've had the place surrounded an hour."

He disappeared with his followers at the double. The Matron went in and mixed herself a strong drink of brandy from the emergency store.

Superintendent Haxtell counted up the score later that evening with Sergeant Gwilliam and Petrella, who had got too close to a flailing Len and had picked up a black eye and a broken nose. They were in the Matron's sitting-room, which had been turned into a temporary first-aid post.

"First," said the Superintendent, "we've got the Prophet, alias ninety-five other things, who came out of Parkhurst three weeks ago, where he'd been doing a long stretch for burglary. As soon as we get him out of hospital we'll charge him with—what?"

"Being on enclosed premises," suggested Sergeant Gwilliam.

"I suppose so. I take it that it's some sort of felony to try and re-steal stolen goods."

"Would you very much mind explaining what it's all about?" said the Matron.

" Certainly, ma'am," said the Superintendent. " This house used to belong to Sir Louis Borderer. Just before his death, the Prophet broke in and cleaned up Sir Louis's collection of Italian court jewellery—good, old-fashioned stuff, gold and diamonds mostly. He was picked up two days later, and charged. Most of the loot was never discovered. The police took all his known hiding-places to pieces; brick by brick. No good. It was even hinted that he might get a remission if he talked. He preferred to take the full rap. He reckoned the stuff was safe enough. It had never left the grounds. He'd lifted that pedestal in the summer-house and shoved it in the hollow underneath."

" Do you mean to say," said the Matron, " that sort of table thing I put my knitting on? "

" That's right, ma'am. Tonight, when he saw the game was up, he told us. I reckon he calculated we couldn't put him away twice for the same job. Which may be right."

" And those others? "

" Ah," said the Superintendent. " There we're on much firmer ground. Breaking, with intent, and violence. And the leader was armed. He'd a loaded gun in his pocket. That ought to take care of *him* for a bit."

" Well," said the Matron, " all I can say is that it's very lucky you happened to be there."

" Very lucky indeed," said Superintendent Haxtell blandly.

Later that evening he talked to Petrella.

" It came out very nicely, didn't it? " said Petrella happily. " They'd left young Jimmy outside, on guard, and he got away. We might pull him in too—but I think it'd be better, don't you, to leave him out of this charge? "

" If you say so," said the Superintendent. " Any particular reason? "

" Well, they're bound to work out that *someone* gave them away," said Petrella. " Their first idea was the Prophet. But, of course, as it turned out, it couldn't have been him. Then, I think, they suspected Jimmy. They knew the boy was friendly with me. If we let him off, they'll be sure they were right."

" Yes," said the Superintendent slowly. " Yes, I suppose that is the best way. May lead to trouble in the future."

It would lead to a lot worse trouble, thought Petrella, if Len ever realized that his wife was the Bird.

★ ★ ★

CORRESPONDENCE WOUND UP?

Sir,—I have at home a ten-inch black disk with a hole in the centre. Is this a record?

Letter in National Daily

STARRING ANDREA

Her bright hair was on my pillow
—I stood gazing down in amazement

BY MICHAEL FOSTER

IT was not my idea of the way to do this picture. It was an upstairs-office idea, and I tried to put them off it. For the girl's sake, though I couldn't let her know that.

Al's office is one of the most dreamlike places in America, and it's better if you've had a good solid breakfast. I had one that morning, at a table beside the unearthly blue swimming-pool in the hotel grounds. I sat there looking at the fantastically tall palm trees in the Californian morning light, and thinking about snowy afternoons along Broadway.

When I drove the sun-drenched miles to the studio and went up to Al's office, we plunged straight into argument. Al was talking picture values, and so was I. But I was thinking silently of Andrea.

Al's idea was for me to take Andrea to the little forgotten town in the middle south where her family had lived for a hundred years. To make location shots; some of the outdoor scenes of the picture; using people of the town as extras, for background. It would be a typical Hollywood expedition, with the cast and a technical crew and equipment. Ordinarily, I'd have agreed because this picture is a very American sort of story, and is set, mostly, in just such a locale. But I had an inkling of what we might run into, in that drowsy little hilltown.

So I argued that we could do the whole thing on the set here, including as much of a town as the scenes needed, for probably less money and a lot less trouble. Also, that I could direct it better that way.

" But look, Jake," Al said. " Home-town girl comes home to make her first big starring picture. Can't you see it? " Al thought it was a smash idea. " The publicity department is all ready with a big build-up," he said.

" But she wasn't born there. She was born in Billings, Montana," I said.

He waved it aside. " That was just an accident of show

business. The old family town is our line on this. Her folks came from there, didn't they?"

"Her mother came from there," I said gently. "Andrea's never been near the place. Andrea's just Broadway."

"Some of her folks still live down there, don't they?"

"They're all dead. May be a few scattered cousins left. I don't know."

"Home town. All the better she's never been back there. We've a publicity department. It makes this the time she comes home—home!"

Al's office—dreamlike. You can get a little dizzy sometimes. And for once, I thought grimly, with about eight words I could have made everything still dizzier. With a touch of nightmare.

I could have told Al why Andrea shouldn't go to that town. But that would have been to expose a background of searing scandal, of tragedy, which Andrea herself had never heard about. And I thought it would damage the girl, just at the start of this first big picture of her own. How much it would damage her, I couldn't even estimate. The story that I knew was enough to scare any producer in Hollywood. It put me in a very awkward situation, and I didn't see any solution. Except to make the film in the studio.

Fighting to protect Andrea any way I could—from the past, and for her future—I practically snarled. "Let's stop this, Al. I don't want to see a good picture I direct all jazzed up with a lot of phoney publicity."

"But she comes home as a star, to the little town her mother ran away from to go on the stage. Think of that! Just think of that, Jake!"

"Al—the fact remains, she's never even seen the place."

"We're going to make this picture an American classic," Al said coldly. "It's going to be authentic in every detail."

When a producer says that, you look reverent and shut up.

I got up and stood looking out of the window, sick with worry for Andrea. I had to make the best of a bad situation by hoping against hope that I might be wrong about what we should find in that town.

In the studio street outside Sound-Stage 8, a bunch of people were standing, girls in hoop skirts and young men in powder-blue swallow-tailed coats and white beaver hats, sweating in the sun. Willie was finishing a big musical. When Al finished talking to me about my trip, I went downstairs and Andrea was waiting for me in my office.

My office is a practical place. Andrea looked very decorative in a shadowy blue linen dress with a wide white formal collar.

The tailored hang of the skirt gravely suggested that she had long and lovely legs—youth and swiftness—and also a great deal of money now.

She stood in the middle of the room with her fists jammed into the deep slash pockets and an unlighted cigarette between her lips, looking with delicate brows of laughter at my stormy face.

We had been waifs of show business together, way back in the poor days, when we were kids; and we had not forgotten. She was ready to go, so I held my lighter to her cigarette, and we went out and got into my car and headed towards the beach for lunch.

On the way, I told her that we had to make this crazy location trip.

" But, Jake dear," she said, " I think it's kind of wonderful. In an odd sort of way, I've got a deep thrill about it. I know you sneer at it, but it means something—well, something basic and very real to me. I've sometimes thought of going there, alone, just to see what it's like."

I had a bad, cold feeling at the pit of my stomach. " You said too damn much to Al about it," I muttered.

" I told him only what Mother always told me, when I was little," she said. " I . . . wish she was still here, to go with us."

I didn't say anything. I had known her mother on Broadway.

Another mile, and Andrea was looking at me wonderingly.

" Andrea," I said suddenly, " before we go, will you marry me? "

It was a block before Andrea said, " But why—why before we go? "

" No reason," I said, " except that I'm asking you to marry me. I—"

" This doesn't sound quite right for a proposal, somehow," Andrea said. " Jake, what is it? "

This was my day of futility—of failure. My producer, and now my star.

" I don't mean to be awkward," I said. " Honey, it's just that I—" She motioned me to silence. I believe she sensed suddenly that I was influenced by something she did not understand.

" Jake, let's keep on believing in each other, at least," she said. " So the answer is no."

" Andrea—"

" It would be no anyway to you, Jake dear. You're the smooth, non-marrying type. I've heard too much about you these last few years. So we won't talk about it any more. I've always been the kid sister, remember? "

She put a hand quietly over mine, on the steering-wheel. After quite a while, she took it away again. In the open convertible,

her hair, filled with light, sometimes blew about her face, and once it blew almost straight out, like wings to her profile.

Andrea was dressed with great dignity the day we all went by train back into the hills towards that town. A grey pinstriped suit of real elegance, and her hair had a softly burnished smoothness like old gold. We could have hired cars and trucks in the state capital, but Andrea wanted to come home the way her mother had left, years ago—by train.

It was more than just an actress superstition; she was strangely wistful about it, as if it were a sort of gentle pilgrimage. A retracing of her mother's life; back to a girl, now lost in time, named Meg. Andrea said she did not want us to arrive like a motorized African safari, or like a rout of gipsies. And I said, "O.K., O.K., my dear." I was afraid it wouldn't make much difference, how we arrived.

Anyway, here we were. Actors and actresses and resigned-eyed technical men watching rusty-streaked limestone bluffs and patches of autumn woods and a lazy little river go by in whipping tatters of coal smoke.

With Andrea sitting beside me on stiff and cindery red plush, I could sense her growing tension. Once I saw her fingers shaking ever so slightly as she took out her powder compact, when we had gone deeper into the hills and the town came nearer. I knew she hoped to find there some real echo of her mother. And I—staring with hard eyes at the dismal scenery, I was sure she would.

When we got there we saw people waiting on the platform. Andrea hung back for a minute, suddenly timid, fumbling with her violet gloves, looking at me with wide and silent grey eyes. From the platform I turned to help her down, but she didn't see my outstretched hand. She was gazing at the town and the broken blue hills beyond.

But the people of the town were all staring at Andrea now. Not quite the way they would stare at any other film star. The younger ones with a strange nudging-and-whispering curiosity, the old people with eyes as splintery as the platform. My worst fears were confirmed.

Our big hooded equipment was coming out of the luggage van. From forty years ago, a museum-piece hotel bus was backed up to the platform in the deep dust. It was greeny-black, with gilt lettering: PLANTERS HOTEL. We all filed decorously up the worn back step and into the bus, and sat facing each other in two long uncomfortable rows.

On the way to the hotel I thought about using this old hotel bus in the picture, but I couldn't. Al would say it was just some-

thing I had dragged in for atmosphere. He would say it wasn't authentic.

At the hotel desk, Andrea bent her head to sign the register. The clerk stared at her with the same open curiosity, not quite veiled insolence. Andrea glanced up and encountered that raw crudeness, and I have never seen a more bewildered human face than hers.

And then the clerk noticed me and I looked into his flat bilious eyes for an appreciable time. Silently.

In my room I unstrapped my bag and got out a bottle of Scotch. With the glass from the bathroom I sat on the edge of the brass bedstead and had a hell of a stiff drink, looking at a dusty window.

I had known Andrea's mother when I was a very young rehearsal pianist in a second-rate theatrical agent's in an old building just off Broadway. Meg was still a pretty woman, but tired and beginning to fade a little, and not an awfully good actress. I knew vaguely that she had a young daughter, at school.

My loose and tinny old piano was in a bare room where the people going on tour could work up their acts if they had no other place, and I remember the afternoon Meg laughed.

I remember the grey January light, and the snow-slush on the pavements outside. Meg was poor and frightened and she suddenly stopped in mid phrase and buried her face in her hands. In laughter. The wrong kind of laughter.

I had some black coffee sent in from a nearby café, went into Sid Salmen's office because I knew he was out, took his private bottle out of his bottom desk drawer, and laced a cup good and strong. And with the cup in her hand and a little colour coming back into her face, Meg talked to me. Maybe because I was so young, only a nameless kid on Broadway, and yet knew for myself how strange and how tough people and the breaks could be.

Meg told me near enough everything that day; and a lot of it was about her girlhood in that remote town among the hills, beside a lazy river.

"I can never go back," she said. "I wouldn't let my little Andrea know for anything. I would die first. And I think I would kill anyone who tried to tell her. Jake, promise me."

"Sure," I said, "I promise."

The well-laced coffee had warmed her, and after a while she gave me a quick, startled glance as if she knew that she had said too much, and I turned back to the keyboard and we went on with her routine. A rehearsal pianist hears them come and hears them go.

But other evenings that winter, Meg asked me to supper in

their furnished room; the first time, I think, to pay me back for Sid Salmen's whisky, but after that because she was a motherly woman and I had no home or folks of my own. And in that shabby room, over the cluttered kind of supper table that people on tour know, I have seen Andrea give her mother such a clear and shining look of trust as maybe many a better woman never sees on the face of her child.

When Sid Salmen booked her for four months on the road, playing a comedy-and-singing act in roadhouse cabarets through the west, Meg had to leave Andrea to board with a family in Brooklyn. She asked me if I would keep an occasional eye on young Andrea—I was only nineteen myself but I guess she had no one else to ask—so sometimes on Saturday afternoons I would take the subway over to Brooklyn with a bag of caramels for her getting sticky in my pocket and the butter beginning to come through the paper.

Andrea at fourteen had a way I shall never forget of coming down the high stone steps of the shabby lodging-house where she boarded. She would stand poised at the top, and then come flying down in a series of swoops, with clatters of her scuffed old school shoes. A creature of springtime and of light. The final long swoop would land her on the pavement, and after that we would usually walk to a little neighbouring park and sit on a bench. My jacket was thin, and I shivered in the Brooklyn wind.

Out on the road somewhere, the rakish slant of Meg's hat was braving the weather of places like Spokane and North Platte and Broken Bow. She lived long enough to see Andrea on Broadway.

Sitting there in that hotel room with a tepid Scotch and water, I watched the blue of the hills deepen beyond Meg's town, and the river darken in twilight. Until the grown-up Andrea came along the hall.

The next day we started work. We had an allocation of twenty-eight thousand dollars a day, and it was only the second time I'd ever had Andrea in a picture of mine. To start off with, I had picked a short sequence on the main street, a scene between Andrea and Jim Latigan, our leading man. We got a block of the street roped off, leaving a small crowd at each end of the block gawping at our set-up of equipment.

My assistant directors had taken on some of the people of the town as extras, for passers-by; and also a slovenly knot of pavement loafers. There were about a dozen of these, a bunch of the town's no-goods, just what we wanted. Ralph, one of the assistant directors, told them all they had to do was to behave naturally, but not spit.

We started a silent run-through for timing. But they knew that none of the equipment was working yet, and as Andrea came on along the pavement to meet Jim Latigan, an old pool-room lout shouted something in answer to a heavy, boar-shouldered yahoo we had hired off a farm truck. Unfortunately, the crowd noises had died away, so his rasping voice carried. They had all been passing round a raw bottle in the alley behind the pool-room.

The old guy had a dirty-looking stubble of grey on his lean jaws. He drew the back of his hand across his mouth and said, " Yeah, that's right. That was her mother. She was a real fast piece of work—and they all knew it round here. And I served my slow twelve years in the pen because of her. She left town by night, but I'd left already in handcuffs."

He fumbled with a limp little bag of tobacco and a brown cigarette-paper. The tobacco shakily spilt and he threw the paper fluttering to the pavement and turned bitterly away. But not to go. You could see he needed the eight dollars we were going to pay him.

A thick snigger came from the heavy-shouldered man, who was eyeing Andrea knowingly up and down, and then they saw me walking towards them.

As I passed Andrea, she looked as if she had taken a blow across the face. I guess that in the comparative silence most of the others had heard it, too, and the old loser from the pool-room suddenly looked sickly defiant, realizing the same thing.

" Get off the set," I said as evenly as I could.

" This is not your set," he snarled thinly. " This is our pavement."

There was a stir and mumble among the other loafers, some of them eased off to one side out of the way, but I was left facing a half-dozen opaque stares from bitter, failure-stained eyes. And then Jim Latigan was crowding up close behind my shoulder. For once, it was pleasant to remember the times he had featured in the gossip columns for his famous free-swinging brawls in Hollywood and New York.

My two young assistant directors came in fast and smoothly, though startled-white around the lips; and by the time they got there, the camera men and the sound men—all the technical crew—had left their set-ups and were drifting nearer. It was like what you've read about—the old circus and carnival days when the immemorial cry of " Hey Rube! " brought the toughs of the show running to do battle with the toughs of the town. But I—my hands were weak, with pity. Because I knew.

For a minute it looked ugly, and then the regular and ordinary men of this town who were to act as passers-by were closing in

around us, leaving the women at a distance, and I saw one woman timidly pat Andrea's shoulder.

A man with a craggy, humorous, early-American face—I found out later that he was the local ironmonger—reached out a substantial hand to tap the old grey pool-room lounger. "We'll have no trouble here," he said genially. "You, Rufe! You get away from here, like the man says."

Rufe swallowed in his lean and corded throat. He hesitated, and then pushed his way through the silent people, and went off alone, a shambling, tragic exit.

"Thanks," I said, and the ironmonger nodded. One glance at Andrea's white face and I called, "All right, everybody in their places again. We're going to be shooting this time."

I knew we could always re-take later on if we had to. But Andrea played it, fiercely dry-eyed. And Jim Latigan very gentle. It was grand for the picture. We couldn't have done quite that with any number of rehearsals. I took advantage, and shifted one scene in the sequence so they played their close-up and dialogue in front of the bunch of no-good loafers—with those still-sullen, slack faces as the background of a tense, half-whispered scene. And that was good for the picture, too.

Andrea came to my room that evening. She slipped in quietly and closed the door behind her and stood there looking at me. I was marking my copy of the script for the next day's work, and with a slow effort I raised my eyes from the rickety hotel-room table and looked at Andrea.

Still quietly, still holding my eyes with hers, she walked over, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Staring at a dusty pane, and the dark.

And after a while, that low husky voice—which sometimes with beautiful monotony and sometimes with passion can tear the roots out of a sound-track. Now she said so little. But it tore the roots out of me.

"Jake! Jake dear—is it true?"

I shoved the script aside and got up and started fiddling around. I mixed her a tooth glass of Scotch and water and she reached out one hand and took it, and I was remembering the little paper bag of caramels.

Andrea took one sip in the silence of that hotel room, and then she handed the glass back to me, quite calmly, and turned sideways and put her face down on my pillow. Her shoulders shook only ever so slightly, and she made no sound, and her bright hair was on my pillow and I stood looking down at the back of her head and at her shoulders.

So I told her, because now I had to, as Meg had told me in a bare rehearsal room long ago, with coffee and whisky; and it was the hardest thing I have ever had to do, in a life filled with things that haven't been easy.

I had so little to go on, trying to tell Andrea about her mother. So frail a charity—I had been so young, with so little understanding of life, when I knew her. But I had to make Andrea believe now, as I think I truly believe, that Meg was not a loose woman, nor an easy one.

Two men in the town had had a fight over her, and one man had been killed. An April night in the woods; after rain, Meg had said carefully. When, I imagine, the dogwood blooms would be like large, uncertain stars among the boughs; and the shy piercing smells of the wet and growing earth.

But there could have been nothing dim or dreamlike about a stab of dirty orange flame from a gun in the hand of—I remembered the name, and I should have done the hiring of the extras myself today—in the hand of Rufe Willoughby.

Young and black-browed, then; staring down at the body of an older man lying hunched on last autumn's fallen leaves. Rufe, slowly opening his hand, letting the revolver fall to the ground. And blood is black by new moonlight, and the one wavering scream of a girl would echo for ever in those woods for the people of that town.

Rufe got off with manslaughter, because of an element of self-defence. After the trial, Meg ran away from the town on the night train with a travelling salesman—a flashy fellow in a bright brown suit, she said. But she divorced him some time during her first vaudeville years, and Andrea's father was a song-and-dance man from the English music-halls, who abandoned Meg and the child in a Pittsburgh lodging-house and then vanished towards Australia. Maybe somewhere he is still playing, but I don't think so, because with Andrea's stardom we'd have heard.

Thinking about those people, and looking down at Andrea's shining head, I stopped trying to explain anything and harshly poured myself a quarter glass of Scotch.

Andrea didn't take her face from the pillow, but she wiggled the little finger of one hand as if to say hullo-and-thank-you, and I touched it lightly with my own fingertip.

"You've known it all along?" she said. "You've always known it?"

"Yes, Andrea."

"Oh. And that's—why you asked me to marry you . . ." Her voice was muffled because she still didn't move her face. "So hurriedly. Before Al made you bring me here. You thought

maybe you could protect me better if you were my husband. Oh Jake!"

The Scotch was sticky and unwarming in my throat; it was like trying to swallow the remembrance of mistakes I've made in my life, as an easy bachelor in show business. Which, this bitter night, with one girl, had left me the most too-late guy who ever looked silently into the bottom of an empty glass. And that I should have so meagre a sense of charity towards Meg, whose mistakes were not like mine?

With a heavier finger, I only touched Andrea's hand again, and said, "Look—this picture should be made in the studio. Let's clear out of this town now. This is all too much for you. Me included."

"We'll stay," she said—with lips I couldn't see, her face still buried in the pillow.

"I'll phone Al," I said, "and tell him just enough. Not too much. Hardly anything. He'll agree. Because I'll lay it mostly on myself, and on that basis I can talk pretty straight. I'll tell him it's either my way or I'll chuck the job. I'll tell him flat that I just can't do a successful job of directing in this place. We'll be out of here by tomorrow night."

Andrea turned her face on the pillow, and was watching me with slitted grey eyes. She swung her feet to the floor and sat up.

"We stay," she said.

So we did. They were iron days, under the soft blue of the autumn hills, in the sunlit dust of a hostile town. Every outdoor scene she played was played before the eyes of that town. And those close-lipped people saw a fine and suddenly maturing artist quietly at work.

I had to be wearily remote and extra curt to keep our whole company from overplaying to her—our Hollywood people, to a man, and to a woman, were backing Andrea. They knew, and they honoured what they were seeing. It was something tougher than all of Broadway or the merciless glare of the great studio lights, and to us, watching her, it shone more greatly.

The old women and old men in the town, those who had been neighbours of Meg's family, still had hard and disbelieving faces. They remembered Meg, and this was her daughter. Yet, as the days of work went on, I began to notice a difference in the younger ones and the middle-aged.

It was nothing ever said, nor any real gesture made; it was a new and quiet way in which they were aware of Andrea, especially the way the housewives and young mothers of the town followed Andrea with their eyes, and sometimes the shadow of a

smile unconsciously on the lips. Of all the town, it was these women who realized first, and realized proudly, the kind of woman Andrea is, and the quality of her courage.

One afternoon, Andrea came walking towards me where I was sitting with a cigarette, in the dust and the sun among the cameras and the sound equipment. " Jake," she said in a curious voice, and then she told me that a committee of four women had come to her on the set; and they had come to ask us all to the Harvest Home festival of the town and the countryside. All of us were invited, but they had come to Andrea.

" They were almost shy," she said in wonder. " They asked me if maybe I'd sing something at the Harvest Home. Just anything, they said. From one of the shows I've been in."

" Are you going to? " I said, thinking of the unthawing faces of the old.

" Jake, I'm going to sing them our big song from this picture," she said. " It will be the first time people will ever hear it, and I want it to be that way. Please, Jake. May I? "

" Well," I said, " but how about an orchestra? We've no—"

" That's for the sound-stage when we get back to the studio. For this, I want country music," she said. " I want the music of these hills."

" Well," I said and, watching her face, I was already preparing to stake on a wild gamble, " if you're going to simplify, Andrea, always simplify utterly. One guitar. But a good one. I'll have Larry Danos flown from Hollywood and—"

She shook her head. " Country music," she said.

After another long minute watching her face, I got up and we walked down the block and into the store and talked to our friend the ironmonger. I told him what Andrea wanted. He looked at us both for a long time, as I had looked at Andrea. That strange silence lengthened.

" Get Rufe Willoughby," he said slowly. " It's all he's good for. But he's the best around here at the guitar. I'll ask him, if you should wish. It—well, it would help him in the eyes of the town." Now he was looking straight at Andrea alone.

I began, " No, I won't have that—and if I know Rufe, he won't do it."

But Andrea's chin lifted and she said quietly, " Yes. He will. Send him. If he's the best."

So Rufe from the pool-room knocked on my door that evening, and he was carrying a very old guitar, worn and rubbed by long years of country hands. He had on a blue serge suit, and new tan shoes that squeaked. Andrea turned from the window and stubbed out her cigarette.

Rufe didn't say anything, but again he swallowed heavily, staring opaquely only at me, to avoid Andrea's clear gaze. I motioned him in and closed the door, and Rufe became the third one of us who had sat unhappily on the edge of that brass bedstead with a Scotch and water in the hand.

"I'm not sure about any of this," he mumbled, his eyes fixed glassily on his guitar where he had leaned it against the wall. "I'm no great shakes at the sight-reading of music, but given time for the study of it—and if in some way I can be of . . ."

"Never mind, Rufe. Listen," Andrea said, and began singing softly.

By the third phrase of her low, beautiful casual voice, Rufe put his drink down on the floor and reached for his guitar. Hesitantly, chording, losing it for a beat and then chording again, Rufe began to follow.

By the end the guitar was singing, too, as simply and as naturally, and Rufe's eyes looking up at Andrea were not the eyes that a pool-room ever saw.

"All right, Rufe, now here's the music," Andrea said, and handed him the score that Gregor Jones had written for her, for this picture.

"Nice tone your guitar has," I said.

"It was my father's," Rufe said with a strange, grave dignity. "And a long way back before him, in time."

He put it down on the bed beside him, and said carefully, "Your mother—when I knew Meg, she had the gift of laughter. Sort of breaking in the throat. With you, it's song. Even when you're only speaking. It pleases me to hear it. I—"

With the bottle in my hand I reached for his glass, but he shook his head. He got up, with his guitar, and walked out of the room, with the pages of music under his arm.

The Harvest Home was something that people like us have never had, but when our bunch from Hollywood came in, I think a little timidly, the town as timidly made us welcome. The church hall had been decorated with the fruits and the grains of the earth and with the autumn leaves of the hills. It was a time of tall talk and mountain fiddles and long trestle tables waiting for the food of country kitchens. Backyard ham and buttermilk biscuits and brown mountain honey; and another good summer past.

I'd had a hunch all along, so with the serious help of the minister, who was gently old in his experienced wisdom of human generations and their follies—and I think secretly amused at my stratagem—I had some sound-equipment hidden, even from

Andrea, in the storage room of the church hall, with the intervening corridor blocked off by a screen of sheaves of corn and grapes and beech leaves.

And when, in a deepening silence, on the night of the Harvest Home, Andrea with her hands clenched in her grey jacket pockets sang for them, I knew that I had guessed right about the effect of this song. The minister knew it, too, and gave me a most unscholarly wink; and then suddenly turned his face away.

Because Andrea, walking a couple of steps nervously to one side, and then back again, watching all the silent faces, would never sing it so well again as she was singing it now, to a back-hills guitar, in big and tune-wise hands. And I had the most expert sound-technicians in the world catching this—this one time of song—in that storage room, making a sound-track.

I saw Andrea glance once at the watch-size black microphone, hanging above her by its V of dark small wires. But she thought it was only for the church hall, only for—well, for the people she was singing to.

All the good songs have been written,
A thousand songs,
A thousand streets,
A thousand years
Of song . . .

Rufe's head bowed over his worn guitar. When we were back in Hollywood, we would make the interior scenes on the stages. And Andrea would sing again, to big expensive background music, for the sake of the visual shots. But for the scene where Andrea sings this song, in the finished picture we would trim off that sound-track with its symphonic music and throw it away; and we would dub this one in, the way Andrea was singing it now.

I walk in the country dust
And see your footprint
Like a quarter note . . .

For our purposes I already knew that this was better than anything we could do on a sound-stage with a muted orchestra. I would see to it that Rufe and his unseen guitar got a credit on the screen—for him, immortality—and I think that all his days now will be different. This song would be played by orchestras enough in years to come. But Rufe played it first.

It was nearly midnight when Andrea and I walked alone back towards the hotel. At the far end of the street a young hunter's moon was setting over the rough dark ridges.

The thing that was still in my ears, as I thought of that moon hanging over the Californian coast out yonder across the continent,

was the uncanny rustling silence of nearly a whole town rising to its feet, in a church hall. I remembered that silence more than the strangely hushed applause when the last note of the song had died away, more than Andrea's gesture beckoning Rufe to get up and stand beside her, holding his guitar in big hands gone suddenly awkward.

At an uneven place on the pavement, Andrea's sleeve brushed mine and she said, " I didn't know it would be like this, Jake."

" Neither did I. I guess we've both learnt a lot," I said.

On the corner ahead, under a dim-burning street light, we saw for a moment three people walking on the fallen leaves: the ironmonger and his wife, and Rufe. The woman touched Rufe's arm and said something, and Rufe looked down at her to answer. I guess it was the first time in years that a decent woman in that town had walked by his side in friendship.

And, for a moment, I thought of the work ahead, and I quietly wished that I could be here to see the faces of the people when the first great orchestral chords opened the picture on the screen of the cinema across the street from the hotel.

About seventy minutes through the picture, and the screen would dissolve slowly into the scene where Andrea, alone in the twilight, sings that song. A deeply shadowed scene, and Andrea would have sung it on a sound-stage with a full studio orchestra out of sight off the set. After that, my crew and I would have done our switching of our sound tracks. Putting in the song as Andrea had sung it this autumn night. I wanted to see the faces of the town when they heard that lonely guitar again.

" What did you mean, Jake—that you've found out a lot, too? " Andrea said.

" Well, about you," I said dully. " I've watched you here in this town. I know you now for what you are. Beyond Broadway. Beyond the studio and the sound-stages."

" I've seen you, too, Jake. Beyond Broadway. But just what are you trying to say to me? "

I looked at her quickly. She didn't turn her face. For that minute, I had only her profile to go by.

" I know I muffed my lines when I asked you to marry me," I said. " I've pulled up good actors for less. Made them stop and say their lines over again."

" And I muffed my answers, I think. May I say mine over again," Andrea asked, " because this time I know you mean it."

A while later, walking up the creaky stairs of the hotel, I said, " I'll have to tell Al. We wouldn't want him to hear it from somebody else. I'll tell him we're going to be married as soon as we get back to the coast."

" No," Andrea said. " I think I'd like us to be married here. In that church. How about Monday? "

The porter was watching us from below, so all I could say for the next few steps was, " I'd better tell Al right away."

In my room, waiting for Al's home phone across the continent to ring, I watched Andrea, leaning in the open doorway. And she was watching my still-startled face, with a slow smile through her cigarette smoke.

" So you don't really know much about women, after all," she said protectingly. " But that's all right, dear. Just give me time."

When Al sleepily picked up his bedside phone, I told him hurriedly and he said, " Fine. I'll be there. I'll catch a plane this morning."

He took a minute to think something over. I heard a match striking, a lungful of smoke blown out.

" I told you it was a smash idea, boy," he said. " What a picture! Think of it, Jake. Just think of it! That little town among the hills is swept up into the bright lights. Because a girl named Meg had to beat it out of there in tragedy and scandal, and because another girl came back."

I swallowed once, and found my voice. " *What?* "

I heard Al give a low, uncertain laugh before he said, " Sure, Jake. I know all about Meg. I knew it all along. The guy I sent to scout the town photographically came home here with the whole story. But I didn't dare tell you and Andrea . . . Now be quiet, Jake! I knew she was an artist, and it wouldn't make any difference. I knew she would come through. And that you would, too, Jake. I said I wanted this picture authentic. And the sequences I've seen, from the cans flown out here, are the beginning of a *real* American classic, and a great—actress."

" Al," I said, " I'm going to—"

" No, all you're going to do is explain to Andrea that I wasn't really a heel to send her there. Because there's another thing," Al said slowly. " Jake, she was bound to find out anyway, sooner or later. Better for her to find it out with your protection, and mine. I'll be seeing you, Jake."

I put the phone down softly, and turned to Andrea. Al's office —dreamlike.

" What is it? " Andrea asked.

" I'll tell you in the morning," I said. " After breakfast."

★ ★ ★

HIS BACH IS WORSE THAN HIS BITE

" Him! " exclaimed Harry Graham, once. " He daren't say oboe to a Goossens! "

WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

WANTED, a Jeeves cum Wife to run small modern house; separate quarters, bedroom, sitting room, kitchen, bath; two in family; state terms; loyalty and no nonsense.

Advertisement in Personal Column

Better Days

Paul and Philbrick went into the pavilion together.

"Me, a butler," said Philbrick, "made to put up tents like a blinking Arab!"

"Well, it's a change," said Paul.

"It's a change for me to be a butler," said Philbrick. "I wasn't made to be anyone's servant."

"No, I suppose not."

"I expect you wonder how it is that I come to be here?" said Philbrick.

"No," said Paul firmly, "nothing of the kind. I don't in the least want to know anything about you; d'you hear?"

"I'll tell you," said Philbrick; "it was like this—"

"I don't want to hear your loathsome confessions; can't you understand?"

"It isn't a loathsome confession," said Philbrick. "It's a story of love. I think it is without exception the most beautiful story I know. I daresay you have heard of Sir Solomon Philbrick?"

"No," said Paul.

"What, never heard of old Solly Philbrick?"

"No; why?"

"Because that's me. And I can tell you this. It's a pretty well-known name across the river. You've only got to say Solly Philbrick, of the Lamb and Flag, anywhere south of Waterloo Bridge to see what fame is. Try it."

" I will one day."

" Mind you, when I say *Sir* Solomon Philbrick, that's only a bit of fun, see? That's what the boys call me. Plain Mr. Solomon Philbrick I am, really, just like you or him . . . but *Sir* Solomon's what they call me. Out of respect, see? "

EVELYN WAUGH, *Decline and Fall*

Admirable Crichton

" Crikey! " said the butler, Crichton,
" Blocking up the blooming street
All these callers keep on calling—
No one thinks of my poor feet!

I was not engaged to answer
Bells that jangle all the time,
These enquiries well might drive a
Better man than me to crime:

How's your master? Is he better?
Is his life in danger still?
Is it true a gang attacked him?
Do you think they shot to kill?

Can you tell us why they did it?
Anarchists? A Fenian plot?
More of this and I'll go barmy,
Like the lad that fired the shot.

Carriage after carriage crowding,
Kind enquirers choke the street:
How is Mr. Hwfa Williams?
No one thinks of My Poor Feet! "

WILLIAM PLOMER, *A Shot in the Park*

Old Detainer

Paget walked slowly across the hall. Grossi bounded along slightly in front of him, glancing back over his shoulder. Paget allowed him to hurry into the dining-room before he turned abruptly left and said, " Follow me please, sir."

Grossi sprang after him. Already he hated Paget. On arrival, he had mistaken the butler for his host and had offered to shake hands . . . Paget allowed the lift to descend a foot below ground level, took it up four feet too far, stopped and started as slowly as possible to inch it down again.

" Come on, come on," snapped Grossi . . .

" What was the name again please, sir? "

" Grossi, *Grossi.*" Paget tapped on the door, and advanced three feet into the room. " Mr. Loss," he announced.

PAMELA BRANCH, *Murder Every Monday*

Wives in their husbands' absences grow subtler,
And daughters sometimes run off with the butler.

LORD BYRON, *Don Juan*

False Quantity

I remember only our butler Catalani's false teeth . . .

The old man had served my grandfather before my father and watched two generations of Pearson children eating, from close behind their chairs. Being a model of his species, he had evolved a method of criticizing their table manners that was consistent with both butlerian dignity and discretion.

If, for example, Leta or Peter or I took more or less icing sugar, fruit, or cream from the dish he proffered us than he considered was polite or good for our insides, he would lean forward imperceptibly closer to our ears and click those false teeth with his tongue. It was a peculiar metallic sound, intended for our ears alone, and infinitely disapproving . . .

I cannot see his face any more, but I can still hear him click.

R. H. PEARSON, *Baynton House*

PRISONER OF NIGHT

The flicker of light on the needle-pointed blade startled her

BY MARK DERBY

THE moment Laurel stepped out of the plane the hot, damp night clamped down like a gag, half stifling her. In the plane, despite the wild anticipation of being in Jeff's arms again, she had been weary, because she hadn't found the way to sleep in the air, and almost every one of the thirty hours of her journey had been sleepless. Now, stumbling down the ladder into the sweltering midnight, she felt closer to collapse than weariness.

But she blinked round in the yellow glare for Jeff's broad shoulders and blue-eyed grin in the blissful realization that now she could leave it all to him. Tonight she'd say nothing of the strain and endless snags of the flight, the engine trouble over the Bay of Bengal, the return to Calcutta to transfer to another plane after a faulty landing, the late arrival in Singapore and missing the local airways connection to this little up-country town. Too tired to talk about it tonight, though Jeff would be sure to ask about her three telegrams, all contradicting each other as the conflicting announcements came through. If he'd ever got them, that was . . .

But where was he?

The Malay hostess was guiding her towards the small customs shed, but she threw back her mass of gold-glinting hair and blinked her fatigue-shadowed, honey-gold eyes across the knot of figures by the plane. Jeff wasn't there, though. She frowned. There couldn't be any question of holding him the other side of the customs barrier, a police officer of the State . . .

It must be what she'd dreaded. He'd got two of her telegrams, but not the third, which would have told him that after all she'd reach Siantan that day: a relief plane had been laid on to make an evening flight to Kuala Lumpur and onwards, carrying ten late main-line arrivals. He must have left the airfield after getting her second wire and gone off to spend the night with friends somewhere—maybe to a last bachelor party.

In the customs shed she looked around for the young engineer she'd spoken to at Singapore Airport. He, at least, could find her somewhere to sleep. But there he was, flashing out of the airfield gates in a Land Rover. Gone. And the hostess was climbing into the plane for take-off. There was nobody any more.

The customs officer, a handsome Malay, made only a brief inspection of her bags. He looked tired, too. Her watch said 11.40. She asked him, "Do you know Lieutenant Hamilton?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Sorry."

Then she asked which was the best hotel in Siantan.

"Cathay Hotel," he told her. "Only one."

A coolie in a scarlet turban was carrying her bags to a taxi. It was the line of least resistance. She climbed into the taxi and told the Chinese driver, "Cathay Hotel."

She sighed as she sank back into the darkness, and the taxi shot through the airfield gates and the black jungle rushed forward to hem her in on both sides. There was no more fight left in her. She felt more like an invalid than a bride . . .

Despite the jolting of the jungle road she drifted into sleep and woke in confusion to hear the driver saying, "Cathay Hotel." Loneliness was like a sharp pain as she returned to consciousness, but on the steps up to the uninviting lobby, a sudden hope roused her.

"Is Lieutenant Hamilton staying here?" she asked the sleepy clerk at the desk.

But no. The hope dropped dead as the Chinese shook his head. And why, she asked herself then, should Jeff stay the night at a seedy little hotel like this when he'd obviously have friends he could stay with around the town? She had an impulse to ask the friendly-looking taxi-driver to take her to the house of the nearest police officer; but she was shy as well as tired on this first night, a total stranger in a new continent, so she asked the clerk for a single room instead.

The clerk said, "Sorry. No rooms."

She sank weakly into the chair the Sikh night-watchman had just vacated and for a moment she was scared she was going to cry. Taking a new grip on herself, she met the clerk's oblique eyes. They were kind of shifty, she decided, and something prompted her to open her crocodile bag and take out a red ten-dollar note.

"Any room," she said. "Just for one night."

Yes, the pale, keen face had changed. But he looked up from the note and said uneasily, "Not many rooms, you see. Tonight all—"

There he stopped, his eye flickering down at the second red

Malayan note Laurel was adding to the first. His hand went out, hesitated, then took them, and folded them small.

"You wait a minute," he said. "I see." But as he turned to the staircase he said something to the night-watchman, who began to take her bags from the taxi. She had won.

When, five minutes later, she locked the door of Room 14 and dropped the key in her bag, she could find no clue to the mystery of the room's sudden availability. It was a biggish room, dingy without being dirty, with green Venetian blinds, a single weak lamp throwing grotesque whirling shadows of the great fan, like an aeroplane propellor, in the centre of the ceiling; a wardrobe, one cane chair, and a yellow rattan mat in the middle of the floor that tripped her up on her way across to the bed.

The bed. Narrow and mosquito-netted. The first bed she'd seen in over forty hours. Yet now, suddenly, she wasn't sleepy any more. She was . . . uneasy instead.

First it was the wardrobe. She had no intention of doing much unpacking, but her wedding dress, folded in a suitcase for three days, would have to be taken out and hung up. When she held up the cascading, gleaming gown, the room looked dingier than ever.

The wardrobe door was locked. There wouldn't have been anything disturbing in that if uneasiness hadn't already begun to affect her, as if her subconscious mind had picked up a warning message on some occult wave-length.

There was the smell, too. She'd been conscious of it from the moment she'd stepped inside the door. Not an offensive smell; a vaguely wholesome smell. Some sort of disinfectant, maybe, though she'd never come across a domestic disinfectant with just that . . . No, of course. Suddenly she knew. It was a medical smell.

There had been a doctor in here a short while ago, and the smell of the medicines he'd used still filled the hot, night-sultry room. And a doctor and medicine meant sickness, a sick person.

A tremor of fear shook her, while through her imagination there flashed a long list of tropical diseases and their wildfire contagiousness. She suffered a panic spasm of nausea and at once she knew she could never sleep in that bed, even though her body cried out for it. She had no evidence that anybody had died in it, ever, but that would explain the hesitation over letting the room tonight. And anyway she was far past cool, objective thinking. Carelessly hanging the bridal gown from a corner of the mosquito-curtain frame, she found the key in her bag and threw open her door.

What it was she was going to do she never knew, because since she'd entered her room the lights in the corridor and down the staircase had all been switched off. Her momentum carried her through the stifling darkness to the top of the stairway where she saw, down the dizzy stairs, the bearded, turbaned Sikh night-watchman dozing in his chair. The clerk had gone and the light over the desk was out.

Suddenly she whirled round. There were doors behind her, like shut eyes, but she had a feeling that one of them had been opened a half second before she turned her head. With a gasp she swung back and ran for her room, locking her door again with shaking fingers, clutching the key in her damp fist, leaning against the panels in semi-collapse.

She just didn't recognize herself any more. "Fool!" she whispered passionately. "What on earth would Jeff think if he could see you now?" Her panic shamed her, but she couldn't master it completely. She went to one of the windows and opened the shutter, tripping over the corner of the cane mat a second time as she crossed the floor. But one qualm subsided as she saw how the wall was sheer below and to the side of both windows.

Outside there was little to be seen. This was the outskirts of the town, with only the jungle beyond the river that ran silently under the window. A river big enough, she imagined, for crocodiles to be lurking down there below her in the darkness. The few houses on the opposite bank were silent and unlit. From across the river came an unceasing, screaming whir, like the vibration of ten thousand overstrung nerves—the cry of the jungle crickets.

Laurel closed her eyes and sighed a long, deep sigh. This was to have been one of the great days of her life. After long weeks apart, they were to have been together again, she and Jeff, with their wedding only six days ahead. It was partly the heady excitement of anticipation that had kept her sleepless all the way across Europe and Asia. Now . . .

She went suddenly rigid. Her honey-gold eyes had been caught, caught and held, by something on the floor, something revealed when she'd kicked aside the corner of the rattan mat.

It was only the crudely traced outline of a human ankle and foot. Life-size. The yellow mat had hidden the blurred chalk outline until she had tripped and displaced its corner; it still hid, presumably, some sort of complete diagram.

She tried to stop herself, but already her hands were reaching for the six-foot-square cane mat and dragging it violently aside. Then she screamed, but there was so little breath left in her that only a fluttering moan came from her suddenly dried lips.

On the floor was the complete outline of a human body in blurred white chalk. A body that sprawled unnaturally, one leg rigid and the other tightly flexed, arms extended stiffly, the head thrown wildly back. And below the crudely traced left arm and right across the breast the floorboards were black with a deep, irregular stain.

After staring down for long seconds, holding her breath until the pulses roared in her temples, Laurel stumbled to the light switch and snapped it off. The terrible picture vanished in darkness, but already it had told its story with brutal clarity.

It was detectives who drew chalk outlines of human bodies on floors. She had seen them in murder films. They traced round the murdered body for reference before it was removed to the morgue for autopsy. Not that the cause of death could have needed much investigation in this case. The huge, dark stain . . .

"Jeff! Oh Jeff . . ."

She was sobbing in her exhaustion and panic. The medical smell was stifling her.

Her whole body shook violently. Like a newly trapped beast she turned madly left and right, blundering into her wedding dress, which fell over her head like a snare net, plunging her in deeper panic as she fought to free herself.

No, she couldn't endure the dark, either. Groping for the switch again, she stumbled on something that bruised her foot through her thin sandal.

As soon as the weak ceiling lamp began throwing the fan blade's monstrous, revolving shadows across the far wall again, she stooped and picked it up, keeping her back to the grim picture on the floorboards.

One look at it and she sank to the floor, breathless with new shock . . .

During Jeff's leave four months ago, when they'd got engaged, he'd given her youngest brother a whole boxful of odds and ends of the kind that delight the hearts of twelve-year-olds: Oriental stamps, a murderous dagger made from a gamecock's spur, Malayan and Burmese coins, the shell of a baby turtle—that sort of junk. And among it she remembered a uniform button of the Federation of Malaya Police, one from Jeff's own uniform.

It was one of those buttons, an identical one, that she had picked up from the floor.

And the button was telling her a story, a ghastly story. It explained why Jeff hadn't been there to meet her, though he must have come down to Siantan to do so.

It explained everything.

Last night this had been Jeff's room. In that bed he had dreamt of the bride who was flying across two continents to marry him. But, maybe in the middle of the dream, a killer with a knife had wakened him and within a few minutes he had bled to death on the floor, where a crude chalk outline was now the last picture she would ever see of him. That was the story the button told her.

"*No!*"

She struggled to her feet and fought the nightmare. For one thing, how could the button have been wrenched off in a death struggle if Jeff had been attacked in the night? He wouldn't have been wearing his uniform in bed! And wasn't the horrible diagram on the floor surely smaller than Jeff's six-foot and broad shoulders? And another thing: where there's a murder there are police, anyway.

It was a policeman who had traced that chalk outline; it must have been his button.

She gathered up the folds of her wedding dress and rearranged it on its hanger.

She tried to focus her mind on the day, less than a week ahead, when she'd wear it and promise herself to Jeff until death should them part. *Death* . . . .the room was death-haunted.

Now she was trying the wardrobe door again, forgetting it was locked. Absently then her hand stretched up to grope along the top of the wardrobe, the place in her own bedroom at home where the key could always be found when it wasn't in the lock.

She didn't find the key, but her groping fingers met and were caught by a large wad of chewing-gum. Exclaiming with disgust, she tried to free her hand, but the filthy stuff seemed only to tighten its hold.

There was something hard, too, mixed up with the gum.

When she'd hung her dress from the mosquito-net frame again, she went to the basin to clean her hand, first removing Jeff's engagement ring-with its twinkling small diamond from her third finger. But no sooner had she begun to clear the mess of gum than Jeff's diamond was suddenly, dramatically eclipsed.

Out of the sticky lump that clogged her fingers a gem had appeared, like a pearl from an oyster. A diamond. Cut but unset and as big as a pea. Even in that poor light the most vivid thing Laurel had ever seen.

She gasped. It was so . . . so unreal. But *that* on the floor behind her was unreal, too. And it wasn't the first time that death and diamonds had gone together.

For minutes she stood staring down at the beautiful gem, her eyes were dreamy . . .

Its brilliant loveliness soothed. When finally she'd dried her hands, put on Jeff's ring again, and dropped the diamond in her handbag, she was calmer.

She found herself talking. Talking to herself in a calm whisper no louder than the whine of the mosquitoes round her, like a mother reasoning with a panicky child.

"Nothing's happening," she told herself. "Nothing's going to happen, either. Something *has* happened up here, that's all, but how can you be scared of something that's already happened?"

Having no answer to that made her somehow easier.

"So get some sleep," she advised herself. "In a few hours you'll be seeing Jeff. If you don't sleep, you're going to look like a drowned cat."

When she made no move, her whisper grew sharper. "What else can you do, anyway? What's the time? Not one o'clock yet. You can't spend five hours on your feet, feeding the mosquitoes, so relax. What are you waiting for?"

And now her weariness was flooding back.

As if she were already walking in her sleep, she managed to switch off the light, kicked off her sandals, and fumbled her way through the mosquito curtains to collapse, fully dressed, on the firm, narrow bed.

Through her exhausted brain a few thoughts drifted faintly: I'd give half the world for a hot bath . . . That clerk came up just to throw the mat over that awful chalk outline, then he gave me the room . . . I know what my ring cost, with my little diamond; *that* one must have cost more than a house . . . Oh Jeff, I want you . . .! I want you . . .!

And then she was asleep at last.

Waking happened instantaneously, like lights switched on in a dark room. When she had collapsed into sleep she had been alone between the locked door and the windows, alone except for the chalked ghost twisted on the floor.

But now there was somebody else. Alive.

Yes, she saw him. The door was open. A current of stale, indoor air was filtering through the mosquito-netting. The moon had risen and a little faded light shone up through the Venetian blinds onto the ceiling, enough to show Laurel, even through the white net, the door softly closing, and a black figure, with something tense and tiptoe about it, just inside.

As soon as the door had clicked to, the beam of a torch shot out towards the wardrobe. Not a full beam, a dimmed one. Fingers were masking the bulb; she could see the light shining

through pink skin. He was turned away from the bed, moving silently to the wardrobe.

Terror held and paralysed her, as if she had been encased in a pillar of ice.

She knew, she *knew* that this was the killer, that this time the murderer really had come back to the scene of his crime. And she knew why. He'd come for the diamond in her bag, because the diamond had been the motive for the crime and he hadn't got it yet.

He had keys, or a skeleton key, and he was trying to unlock the wardrobe. Last night he must have been interrupted in his search. Now she glimpsed the fierce, tightly coiled intensity of him as he bent over the lock. He was small and starvation-thin, with black hair, a yellow-grey face with grotesque sun-glasses, and a thin mouth like a scar; dressed in a grey shirt and dark trousers that looked too big for him because he was so shockingly thin.

Then the sudden whirling-round as he sensed that he wasn't alone. His torch beam fell on her wedding dress and he stared at it a moment, then the light probed through the mosquito-netting. Even in its glare she didn't blink. She crouched as motionless as the chalk man on the floor, silent, paralysed, not even praying in her terror.

"I beg your pardon." The quietly spoken words were a deeper shock than anything she had dreaded.

"This was my room till I moved to another today. I must have left my . . . medicine in here. I didn't know they'd let it to another guest."

Laurel said nothing.

"I still had the key, so . . ." With each softly lisped word he was coming slowly towards the bed, silently, keeping the torch beam steadily on her eyes. She was close to utter helplessness. An hour of sleep hadn't even begun to relieve her exhaustion. She was conscious only of fear and love—panic fear and anguished, ocean-deep love.

She could fear so much only because she loved so much. She had something more than life to lose now.

Dimly, in the blackness outside the ray of white light, she saw the emaciated face, bones projecting sharply through ashy, papery skin, mouth as thin as a knife blade. He had almost reached the bed, stepping silently across the outline of his victim on the floor, before Laurel finally broke free of the paralysis of panic.

It was the flicker of reflected torchlight on a needle-pointed blade that unlocked her tongue and limbs. She screamed, wildly,

as if the knife were already in her throat, and threw herself back through the net.

As soon as she was on her feet he came swiftly round the head of the bed, his right hand poised, the light in his left. With a gasp she tore down her wedding dress and hurled it at him. He vanished in a cloud of organza; the torch beam went dim and the blade sliced through the muffling folds but missed its aim.

There was a shock like a red-hot needle tracing a stinging line down her right shoulder to the elbow, and then she was tearing at the door, still screaming, out through the door, racing barefoot down the dark corridor.

At the black corner by the head of the stairs she fell heavily. Half stunned, moaning, she struggled frantically against the arms that swept her up—unaware for agonized seconds that they were Jeff's arms, that it was Jeff's half-crazy voice that tried to drown her screams. And then . . . the blissful, blissful realization.

" When I got your second wire," Jeff explained, " I went along to stay the night with friends five miles out of town. A bit of a party developed and fellows kept drifting in. I never had a word with Brown, the new tin-mine engineer, until the party was breaking up. The moment he told me he'd flown up from Singapore this evening I—well, you can imagine! We all tore off on a hunt for you and . . ."

Somebody was dusting the wound on her arm with sulphur powder. A police car pulled up, and the killer, his famished face glaring, was hustled inside. Laurel said, " There's a big diamond in my bag . . ."

Then she heard about the diamond, which had been bought by the Sultan of that State to form part of his wedding gift to his daughter.

It had been stolen the same day by a Singapore jewel thief, who'd been murdered in Room 14 twenty-four hours ago " By him, of course," Jeff said, as the police car turned and passed the entrance again on its way to the gaol. " He made a getaway with the dead man's case, but the diamond wasn't in it. So he came back."

She was only half listening, just listening to Jeff's voice without noticing much what he was saying, loving him as never before. But now another car had pulled up and a smiling woman who instantly reminded Laurel of her mother was taking charge. The Police Commissioner's wife.

" You need a bath and bed, my dear," she said briskly, " and they're both waiting for you just down the road. Kiss her good-night, Jeff, and don't you dare to come disturbing her till lunch-

time tomorrow. She'll be ready for you then."

"Yes, Jeff," Laurel whispered drowsily. "Lunch-time tomorrow. That'll be our proper meeting."

And a moment later she was asleep there in his arms, blissfully looking forward.

★ ★ ★

ARGOSY COMPETITION RESULT

Readers were not quite so effervescent with ideas for subtitles for Ruth Goldsmith's story *Moonshine* as they were in the previous, more straightforward, title competition. We found this story a teaser, too! Two guineas goes to Pat More, Newdigate, Surrey, for: "*Soberly they looked—and saw a green creature with two heads*," which, below the title, ought, we think, to encourage anybody to read on.

IN NEXT MONTH'S

ARGOSY

PAUL GALLICO

has brought to life a haunting, tender Christmas legend, set in the ancient forests where the law of the wild sometimes gives way before the power of love.

MICHAEL GILBERT

when an immovable detective meets an irresistible blonde walking the streets in her pyjamas, there's likely to be an explosion, and Detective Petrella's third exploit is full of surprises.

H. E. BATES

contributes a brilliant story, full of warm appeal—evocative, unforgettable.

There's Something for Everyone in

ARGOSY

ON SALE DECEMBER 7

LOTUS FLOWER

He realized with a start
that he was happy

BY LESLIE BONNET

KNOW that seventeen hundred years ago there were three kingdoms in China. One of them was the Kingdom of Wu. Then behold how the King of Wu waits in the quick dusk of one midsummer evening for the coming of Hsi Shih, his favourite concubine.

This man is Fu-Ch'a, a stout, mellow person of the middle age, face smooth and hairless but for the thin moustache whose slender ends reach his chin. He reclines, propped on one elbow, on a low couch on the terrace of the palace he had builded for Hsi Shih. Below him, on the black pool, closed lotus blossoms sparkle in the paling light. Behind, connecting terrace with palace, runs the poetic curve of the Echoing Corridor.

Fu-Ch'a had devised this quaint gallery so that when Hsi Shih came to his bidding his ears might be delighted with the gay echoes of her precise footsteps. And so, as he threw back the long sleeve of his yellow robe to clasp delicate long-nailed fingers in an attentive gesture, Hsi Shih came to him.

First from afar there was the light flutter of long silk, followed by the click and patter of tiny, pointed slippers; and next the whole corridor behind him was pealing with the sharp tap of the small steps and the tinkle of heavy ornaments. Then, like a warm breath of wind, Hsi Shih was lying, limp as thrown water, in shapely subjection, mute with longing, at his feet. The last light flickered in the jewels in her piled black hair. Her gown of green glowed with golden embroidery.

For a space they stayed, entranced. Behind them, over the swarming city of Soochow, the sun's red fingers drew the drapery of night. The pool lay still and hard. A star burnt and fell towards where Lin-Yen, the green mountain lay, a mass of darkness in the west.

Hsi Shih raised her head, her face amber-glowing, eyebrows blackly arched, eyes upslanting, fugitive. Her lips did not move. The King of Wu drew her to his side. In a sweet solitude of silence and moonlight they cleaved together. There was no

movement, scarce a sign of breathing The black water lapped idly against the terrace piers. The moon rose high into the frost of stars, lighting there on the terrace hour upon hour of calculated ecstasy

The cicadas had long since ceased their nervous chorus. The moon had gone down into the nether night. The bullfrogs had spent their urgent chatter before those lovers shuddered, and sighed, and at last stirred. Hsi Shih, wrapping herself again in green and gold against the night chill, looked with wistful affection at Fu-Ch'a by her side.

In the dim starlight his face looked older and more weary. Hsi Shih, black lashes wet with tears, threw over him a great rug and, rising in one lithe movement to her feet, clapped her hands softly for those who would attend him. Then, with a flurry of soft garments, she was gone. Going away down the Echoing Corridor was the sweet sound of grave finery and nimble feet.

And so this third summer season of their loving behaviour passed like the others, in a half swoon of measured delights.

There is much of disappointment in the life of kings. These exalted persons have still a desire to be loved. But what is there of love in those creatures who cringe before the throne for gain, or who prostrate themselves for favour, fragrant of body, eyes downcast, lips fresh with honey?

It is said that it was not until this third year of their union that the King of Wu gave himself unreservedly to this gracious plaything, who had been sent to him by the neighbouring King of Yueh. Until that time Fu-Ch'a had suffered the entertainments of Hsi Shih with no more than suitable condescension.

On a gay morning, bright with birds, he would listen, grave of face and inwardly tormented, as leaning over a moon bridge, she made melting music on the p'i p'a lute. Or on a heavy afternoon he would watch, appreciative of the never-failing grace of movement, as Hsi Shih, bending over the black waters of the terrace pool, parted the flushing lotus flowers to make a mirror for herself in the water.

Certain it is that, at some sudden moment, the caution of the King forsook him. Looking into the young eyes of Hsi Shih, he felt improvident youth return to him. From that time the hitherto discreet monarch laughed, shouted, and frolicked in his private hours, as if he had shed many unprofitable years. Such conduct on the part of kings is imprudent. These great ones may well find it politic to appear human; but they become so at their peril. In the peculiar situation of Fu-Ch'a, unrestrained comportment was especially unfortunate.

Four years before this time the Kingdom of Wu had gained a

decisive victory against the adjoining Kingdom of Yueh. So complete had victory been that the precise and painstaking Fu-Ch'a had, rather to his own astonishment, returned to his capital at the head of his all-conquering troops with the highly displeased personage of the King of Yueh as his prisoner. Such total success had been almost disconcerting.

However, after a few months of civil treatment and noble entertainment, the captured king was escorted back with all honours to his bereaved subjects and his undiminished kingdom.

Surely it was some evil spirit which led Fu-Ch'a to expect gratitude from an enemy so generously treated. Innumerable historical examples could have been cited to show the absurdity of such a belief. And, indeed, as was natural, the King of Yueh resented bitterly the humiliation of having been thus patronized. On his return to the Kingdom of Yueh, his grudging rancour took an extreme form. He slept only upon a harsh straw pallet. At each dawn he drank bitter gall. These things were calculated to remind him that there was a score to settle with the Kingdom of Wu.

And, urged on by those uncomfortable reminders, he diligently sought means to humble the insulting Fu-Ch'a. To reassure and to weaken were, he decided, the most effective first steps. He therefore sought every opportunity to make known his affection and gratitude to his amiable conqueror. And at the same time he sought some maiden, patriotic of purpose and pleasing in person, who might attract the attentions of Fu-Ch'a away from the wise governance of his kingdom.

He found Hsi Shih—young, accomplished, flawless in feature and perfect in poise. She was ready, too, to be instructed as to how the good of the Kingdom of Yueh could be reconciled with fervent behaviour. She was the most delectable of the many gifts which the King of Yueh pressed upon his benefactor.

So, in that paradise that only fools can enter, Fu-Ch'a dallied for three sweet years. As he became more deeply engrossed in the warm playfulness of Hsi Shih, he left her with growing impatience for affairs of state, and returned from them to her glowing company with increasing haste.

When the eye of a ruler ranges vacantly over matters small and large, a double disintegration sets in. Amongst ministers and officers, the evil ones are encouraged in their bad courses; the worthy ones suffer and stand, frustrated. The affairs of the Kingdom of Wu therefore fell into disorder. Foolish counsellors, unwarlike generals, unjust judges prospered. The friends of Wu were insulted; her enemies were made much of; the army relied

increasingly on the aid of wonder-making magicians; and the people wept.

Meanwhile, like two actors upon a stage when behind the scene the theatre rocks and smoulders, Fu-Ch'a and Hsi Shih played out their part in view only of the Four Great Heavenly Ones who alone know what is in the heart of man and woman. And it was with exemplary artistry that Hsi Shih played her part. The King was her slave. He—whose unimpressive but competent presence had rallied armies, whose quiet, confident word had ruled a court—now doted.

She had danced for him on a warm evening. Wielding the double swords with exquisite art, dressed in the embroidery-encrusted robes of one of the warrior maidens of legend, with long pheasant feathers nodding from crested headdress, she danced in such entrancing fashion that the King, beaming, clapped his hands and called for wine.

As soon as the servants had retired, she, flushed with exertion, flung herself down by his feet. When the cups had been drained she drew back the heavy robe and lifted a warm face of purest sheen to his. Fu-Ch'a, instead of raising her to him, slipped down to her himself and hid his head in her bosom, like an awkward child.

It is possible that the Four Great Heavenly Ones had tired of this play's plot and, wishing for a different ending, put thoughts into the heart of Hsi Shih. Or perhaps it was a jest, ancient even then, so rich as to demand repetition. Of what use is it to debate this question? All that is known is that, at that sunset moment, beholding the weakness of Fu-Ch'a, who had been so strong, Hsi Shih conceived a great love for him.

The sun sank behind the wooded ridges of Lin-Yen mountain and burnt behind the trees. A pale mist crept across the surface of the black pool, whereon the lotus flowers had closed tight their petals. From below came the deep hum of a great city. There was no other sound. The sky went farther away up into the night. There were only the stars to see by.

And huddled, not in sport but in mutual solace, Fu-Ch'a and Hsi Shih clutched jealously each the other. Sometimes Hsi Shih sang softly the songs of her village girlhood, sometimes she wept. They slept. And cautious attendants came by and wrapped warm rugs about them both.

The white mists of the next morning stole away from the sun's hot gaze like tired dancing-girls after a night of feasting. On the King's terrace the gleaming pavilion threw hard shadows upon the baking pavement. Fu-Ch'a, in grateful shade, was beginning with bold and beautiful brush strokes a poem upon the vicissitudes

of life, only a little prematurely. He laid the strip of rice paper carefully upon a small table hung with silk. He looked around him with contentment, and realized with a start of surprise that he was happy. There was a rapt expression on his earnest face. As he fingered his wisp of moustache his lips parted in a smile. It was as if he could hear along the Echoing Corridor the musical movements of Hsi Shih coming to him again.

But there was instead only a dry quietness. In such a small time it would be the hour of audience, and beyond that stretched the prospect of the meeting of counsellors. And the business of the Hwa T'ang Chow region was to be settled. A great heaviness fell upon Fu-Ch'a's spirit. He felt estranged from the vain turmoil of government.

With an impressive gesture he took up his brush again, and began to paint a new poem. It was to deal with the satisfactions of simple toil in wind and sun, with the felicity of love and the tenderness of children. There would be reference in it to the salutary effects of harsh things, as well as to butterflies and lotus blossoms. He bent over his task with boyish intent.

A respectful shuffling of feet prevented him. Owlish officials ventured to remind him of the hour of audience. The slip of rice-paper blew languidly across the flagstones.

The day passed unprofitably. The shallow coolness of evening gave way to the depth of night. The quaint pavilion, palely white in the starshine, again sheltered those two who loved one another. And as they lay, smiling now in sleep, far away low in the western sky a pink glow flickered. No man in all Soochow saw it or, seeing it, paid any heed. It was too distant. It was a day's march and yet half a day more away—as an army marches.

For on that morning the King of Yueh had launched his invasion. By the evening of the third day he was in Soochow. The improvident Fu-Ch'a was in his hands, a bewildered prisoner. No doubt the conqueror had good reason for not dispatching his captive. His attitude, which seemed lenient, was perhaps calculating. He asked the abased Fu-Ch'a where he wished to go. Fu-Ch'a, astonished and genuinely indifferent, said he would go anywhere. He would go to the mountain, to Lin-Yen. Yes, he would like that.

" Go in peace," said the King of Yueh—and of Wu.

The new master was not even astonished that Hsi Shih should elect to go with Fu-Ch'a. It was the unexpected that life had taught him to expect. And she was of no further use . . .

Perhaps the Great Heavenly Ones stay to hear the end of the story. Perhaps they have devised it.

On a smooth shoulder of the mountain Lin-Yen, against a

forest of bamboo and softwood, Fu-Ch'a, with unpractised industry, has erected an insecure cabin. With walls of split bamboo and a roof of bamboo leaves it keeps out most of the rain and much of the wind. With mattock and bruised hands he has cleared a small patch for growing beans. In his hunting he uses the short bow. With it he spreads consternation among the wild birds.

The site is rain-washed in this early spring. By the open doorway of the hut a broken sprig of magnolia has been pushed into the soil. Soon it will burst a leaf. One day it may bear magnolia blossom; white waxen loveliness carved against a hard, blue sky.

They sit on a split log before the cabin. At their feet is a pool of water. If she leans forward, Hsi Shih can see her face reflected in it like a lotus flower. So she looks but the once. It is not quite the same face that Fu-Ch'a still sees.

She looks instead down across the plain where that great city of Soochow shimmers in sunlight, radiant and serene. The tiny paddy fields that chequer the plain sparkle with water. The fervent young green of rice laces each cherished plot. It is far away and beautiful. Doubtless it is also warm. Up here, on the mountain's slope the breeze still has a clinging chill.

Hsi Shih looks again at the ground where they sit. A twig for firing that her lord has dropped lies trodden in the mire. But in the heavy puddles there are wilds glints of blue from the clear fresh sky, and the twig's wet bark glistens in the pale sunlight.

She smiles. She puts a hand to her side where she feels life stirring, and smiles again. It is as if she can see happy children playing under a magnolia tree, as if she can hear the comfortable sounds of a man working in contentment.

Fu-Ch'a, at ease, a little proud of his clumsy labours, looks very gently at her. "Is it not just as agreeable here?" he asks her at last, stroking his moustache with cracked fingers.

Hsi Shih tells him that it is.

Fu-Ch'a, with eager steps, goes into the cabin to find his brush and ink.

★ ★ ★

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Premeditation.* 10, *Experts.* 11, *Ali Baba.* 12, *Eros.* 13, *Cleft.* 14, *Ming.* 17, *Infancy.* 18, *Chianti.* 19, *Rampant.* 22, *Road-hog.* 24, *Tiro.* 25, *Niobe.* 26, *Orgy.* 29, *Outcast.* 30, *Italian.* 31, *Blandishments.*

Down. 2, *Reproof.* 3, *Mark.* 4, *Display.* 5, *Traffic.* 6, *Twig.* 7, *Ovation.* 8, *Deterioration.* 9, *Laughing hyena.* 15, *Knead.* 16, *Midas.* 20, *Marital.* 21, *Tais-toi.* 22, *Rubbish.* 23, *Harpist.* 27, *Cain.* 28, *Lake.*

AS GAY AS CHEESE

The greenish mirror reflected
narrow eyes brilliant from lack of sleep

BY JOAN AIKEN

MR. POL the barber always wore white overalls. He must have had at least six, for every day he was snowy-white and freshly starched as a marguerite, his blue eyes, red face, and bulbous nose appearing incongruously over the top of the bib.

His shop looked like—and was—a kitchen, roughly adapted to barbering with a mirror, basin, and some pictures of beautiful girls on the whitewashed walls. It was a long narrow crack of a room with the copper at one end and a tottering flight of steps at the other, leading down to the street; customers waiting their turn mostly sat on the steps in the sun.

Mr. Pol rented his upstairs room to an artist, and in the summertime when the customers had been shaved or trimmed they sometimes went on up the stairs and bought a view of the harbour, water or oil, or a nice still life. The artist had an unlimited supply of these, which he whipped out with the dexterity of a card-sharper.

Both men loved their professions. When the artist was not painting fourteen-by-ten-inch squares for the trippers, he was engaged on huge, complicated panels of mermaids and sharks, all mixed up with skulls, roses, and cabbages, while Mr. Pol brooded over the heads of his customers as if he would have liked to gild them.

" Ah, I'm as gay as cheese this morning," he used to say, bustling into his kitchen with a long, gnomish look at the first head of hair waiting to be shorn. " I'll smarten you up till you're like a new button mushroom . . .

" Now I'm as bright as a pearl," he would exclaim when the long rays of the early sun felt their way back to the copper with an underwater glimmer.

When Mr. Pol laid hands on a customer's head he knew more about that man than his mother did at birth, or his sweetheart, or confessor—not only his past misdeeds but his future ones, what he had had for breakfast and would have for supper, the name of his dog, and the day of his death.

This should have made Mr. Pol sad or cynical, but it did not. He remained impervious to his portentous gift. Perhaps this was because the destinies of the inhabitants of a small Cornish town contained nothing very startling, and Mr. Pol's divinings seldom soared higher or lower than a double twenty or a sprained ankle.

He never cut his own hair, and had no need to, for he was as bald as an egg. "It was my own hair falling out that started me thinking on the matter," he told the artist. "All a man's nature comes out in the way his hair grows. It's like a river—watch the currents and you can tell what it's come through, what sort of fish are in it, how fast it's running, how far to the sea."

The artist grunted. He was squatting on the floor, stretching a canvas, and made no reply. He was a taciturn man, who despised the trippers for buying his pink-and-green views.

Mr. Pol looked down at the top of his head and suddenly gave it an affectionate, rumpling pat, as one might to a large woolly dog.

"Ah, that's a nice head of hair. It's a shame you won't let me get at it."

"And have you knowing when I'm going to eat my last bite of bacon? Not likely."

"I wouldn't tell you, my handsome!" said Mr. Pol, very shocked. "I'm not one to go measuring people for their coffins before they're ready to step in. I'm as close as a false tooth. There's Sam now, off his lorry, the old ruin; I could tell a thing or two about him, but do I?" He stumped off down the stairs, letting out a snatch of hymn in his powerful baritone.

"And there's some say," he went on, as he sculpted with his shears round the driver's wicked grey head, "that you can grow turnip from carrot seed under the right moon. Who'd want to do that, I ask you?"

"Shorter round the ears," grumbled Sam, scowling down into the enamel basin.

When the night train from Paddington began to draw down the narrow valley towards the sea town, Brian and Fanny Dexter stood up stiffly from the seats where they had slept, and started moving their luggage about. Brian was surly and silent, only remarking that it was damned cold and he hoped he could get a shave and a cup of coffee. Fanny glanced doubtfully at her reflection in the little greenish mirror. A white face and narrow eyes, brilliant from lack of sleep, glanced back at her.

"It'll be fine later," she said hopefully. Brian pulled on a sweater without comment. He looked rough but expensive, like a suede shoe. His thick light hair was beginning to grey, but hardly showed it.

"Lady Smythe and Penelope said they'd be getting to Pengelly this week," Brian observed. "We might walk along the cliff path later on and see if they've arrived yet. We can do with some exercise to warm us and they'll be expecting us to call."

"I must do some shopping first. It's early closing, and there's all the food to lay in."

Brian shot her an angry look and she was reminded that although the ice of their marriage seemed at the moment to be bearing, nevertheless there were frightening depths beneath and it was best not to loiter in doubtful spots.

"It won't take long," she said hurriedly.

"It was just an idea," Brian muttered, bundling up a camel-hair overcoat. "Here we are, thank the lord."

It was still only nine in the morning. The town was grey and forbidding, tilted steeply down to a white sea. The fleet was out; the streets smelt of fish and emptiness.

After they had had coffee Brian announced that he was going to get his shave.

"I'll do my shopping and meet you," suggested Fanny.

"No, you bloody well won't, or you'll wander off for hours and I shall have to walk half over the town looking for you," snapped Brian. "You could do with a haircut yourself, you look like a scotch terrier."

"All right."

She threaded her way after him between the empty tables of the café and across the road into Mr. Pol's shop. Mr. Pol was carefully rearranging his tattered magazines.

"Good morning, my handsome," he cautiously greeted Fanny's jeans and sweater and Eton crop, assessing her as a summer visitor.

"Can you give me a shave and my wife a haircut, please?" cut in Brian briskly.

Mr. Pol looked from one to the other of them. "I'll just put the kettle on for the shave, sir," he answered, moving leisurely to the inner room. "And then I'll trim the young lady, if you'd like to take a seat in the meanwhile."

Brian preferred to stroll back and lean against the doorpost with his hands in his pockets, while Mr. Pol wreathed Fanny's neck in a spotless towel. Her dark head, narrow as a boy's, was bent forward, and he looked benignly at the swirl of glossy hair, flicked a comb through it, and turned her head gently with the palms of his hands.

As he did so, a shudder like an electric shock ran through him and he started back, the comb between his thumb and forefinger jerking upward like a diviner's rod. Neither of the other two

noticed; Brian was looking out into the street, and Fanny had her eyes on her hands which were locked together with white knuckles across a fold of the towel.

After a moment Mr. Pol gingerly replaced his palms on the sides of her head with a pretence of smoothing the downy hair above the ears, and again the shock ran through him. He looked into the mirror, almost expecting to see fish swimming and seaweed floating around her. Death by drowning, and so soon; he could smell salt water and see her thin arm stretched sideways in the wave.

"Don't waste too much time on her," said Brian, looking at his watch. "She doesn't mind what she looks like."

Fanny glanced up and met Mr. Pol's eyes in the glass. There was such a terrified appeal in her look that his hands closed instinctively on her shoulders and his lips shaped to form the words: "There, there, my handsome. Never mind," before he saw that her appeal was directed, not to him, but to her own reflection's pathetic power to please.

"That's lovely," she said to Mr. Pol with a faint smile, and stood up, shaking the glossy dark tufts off her. She sat on one of his chairs looking at a magazine while Brian took her place and Mr. Pol fetched his steaming kettle.

"You're visiting the town?" Mr. Pol asked, as he rubbed up the lather on his brush. He felt the need for talk.

"Just come off the night train; we're staying here, yes," Brian said shortly.

"It's a pretty place," Mr. Pol remarked. "Plenty of grand walks if you're young and active."

"We're going along to Pengelly by the cliff path this morning," said Brian.

"Oh, but I thought you only said we *might*—" Fanny began incautiously, and then bit off her words.

Brian shot her a look of such hatred that even Mr. Pol caught it, and scuttled into the next room for another razor.

"*Will* you stop being so damned negative," Brian muttered to her furiously.

"But the groceries—"

Brian drew his hand back; Fanny flinched uncontrollably. They remained motionless, eyes locked, for a moment, and she paled under the poison of his look.

Then he slowly lowered his hand.

"Oh, to hell with the groceries. We'll eat out. Lady Smythe and Penelope will think it most peculiar if we don't call—they know we're here. I suppose you want to throw away a valuable social contact for the sake of a couple of ounces of tea. I can't

think why you need to do this perpetual shopping—Penelope never does."

"I only thought—"

"Never mind what you thought."

Mr. Pol came back and finished the shave.

"That's a nice head of hair, sir," he said, running his hands over it professionally. "Do you want a trim at all?"

"No, thanks," replied Brian abruptly. "Chap in the Burlington Arcade always does it for me. Anything wrong?"

Mr. Pol was staring at the ceiling in a puzzled way.

"No—no, sir, nothing. Nothing at all. I thought I saw a bit of rope hanging down, but it must have been fancy." Nevertheless, Mr. Pol passed his hand once more above Brian's head with a gesture of someone brushing away cobwebs.

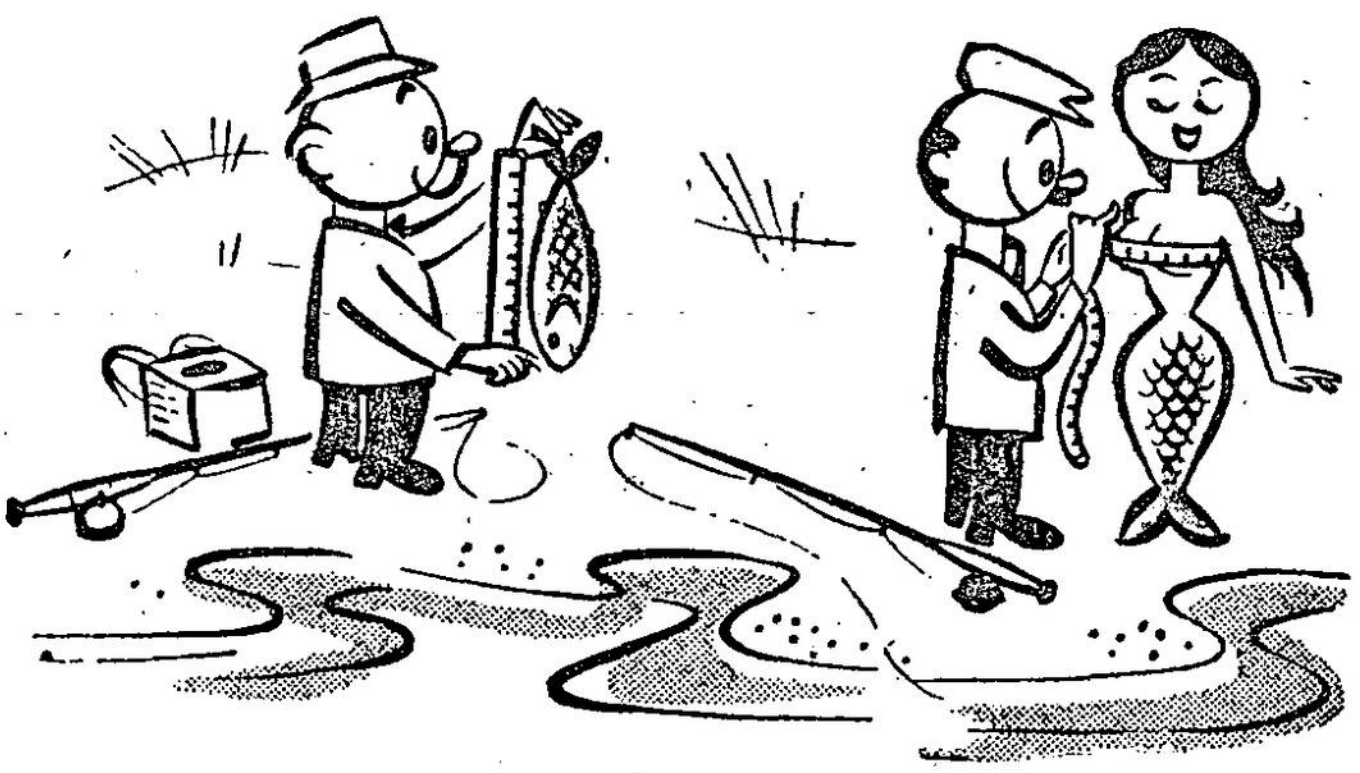
"Will that be all? Thank you, sir. Mind how you go on that path to Pengelly. 'Tis always slippery after the rain, and we've had one or two falls of rock this summer."

"We'll be all right, thanks," said Brian, walking out of the door without listening. "Come on, Fanny." He swung up the street with Fanny almost running behind him.

"Have they gone? Damnation, I thought I could sell them a view of the cliffs," said the artist, coming in with a little canvas. "Hullo, something the matter?" For the barber was standing outside his door and staring in indecision and distress after the two figures, now just taking the turning up to the cliff path.

"No," he said at last, turning heavily back and picking up his broom. "No, I'm as gay as cheese."

And he began sweeping up the feathery tufts of dark hair from his stone floor.



This month's reprint leads from cupidity to Cupid: for who could resist a starry-eyed lad with five thousand francs?

ENTRANCE FEE

BY ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

THIS, then, is the story of Cosette and the Saint-Cyrien, much as they tell it—and these many years have been telling it—in the smoky popotes of the French army.

In the 'nineties, when one heard less ugly babel of alien tongues in the sidewalk cafés, the talk at the aperitif hour was sure to turn sooner or later on Cosette—Mademoiselle Cosette of the Variétés, who was regarded by common consent as the most desirable woman in France. She was no hedged-in royal courtesan, as her possessive fellow-citizens would point out with satisfaction, but a distributed Du Barry, the chère amie of a republic.

Her origins were misty. Some said she had been born of fisher folk at Ploubazlanec on the Brittany coast. Others preferred the tale that she was the love-child of a famous actress by a very well-known king. In any case, she was now a national legend, and in her pre-eminence the still-bruised French people found in some curious way a balm for their wounded self-esteem.

Her photographs, which usually showed her sitting piquantly on a café table, were cut from *L'Illustration* and pinned up in every barracks. Every French lad dreamt of her, and every right-minded French girl quite understood that her sweetheart was saying in effect, " Since I cannot hope to have Cosette, will you come to the river's edge at sundown? " Quite understood, and did not blame him.

Everyone had seen the pictures of Cosette's tiny, vine-hung villa at Saint-Cloud, with its high garden wall and its twittering aviary. And even those for whom that wall was hopelessly high took morbid pride in a persistent detail of the legend which said that no man was ever a guest there for the night who could not bring five thousand francs with him. This was in the 'nineties, mind you, when francs were francs, and men—by a coincidence then more dependable—were men.

The peasant blend of charm and thrift in Cosette filled the cadets at Saint-Cyr with a gentle melancholy. In their twilight hours of relaxation they talked it over, and all thought it a sorrowful thing that, so wretched is the soldier's pittance, not one of those who must some day direct the great *Revanche* would ever carry into battle a memory of the fairest woman in France. For what cadet could hope to raise five thousand francs? It was very sad. But, cried one of their number, his voice shaking, his eyes alight, there were a thousand students at Saint-Cyr, and not one among them so lacking in resource that he could not, if given time, manage to raise at least five francs.

That was how the Cosette Sweepstakes were started. There followed then all the anxious distraction of ways and means, with such Spartan exploits in self-denial, such Damon-and-Pythias borrowings, such flagrant letters of perjured appeal to unsuspecting aunts and godmothers, as Saint-Cyr had never known. But by the appointed time the last man had his, or somebody's, five francs.

The drawing of numbers was well under way when a perplexed instructor stumbled on the proceedings and reported his discovery to the Commandant. When the old General heard the story he was so profoundly moved that it was some time before he spoke.

"The lad who wins the lottery," he said at last, "will be the envy of his generation. But the lad who conceived the idea—ah, he, my friend, will some day be a Marshal of France!"

Then he fell to laughing at the thought of the starry-eyed youngster arriving at the cottage door of the Variétés with nothing but his youth and his entrance fee. The innocent budget had made no provision for the trip to Paris, none for a carriage, a bouquet, perhaps a supper party. The Commandant said that he would wish to meet this margin of contingency from his own fatherly pocket. "There will be extras," he said. "Let the young rascal who wins be sent to me before he leaves for Paris."

It was a cadet from the Vendée who reported to the Commandant next afternoon—very trim in his red breeches and blue tunic, his white gloves spotless, his white cockade jaunty, his heart in his mouth. The Commandant said no word to him, but put a little purse of gold louis in his hand, kissed him on both cheeks in benediction, and stood at his window, moist-eyed and chuckling, to watch until the white cockade disappeared down the avenue of trees.

The sunlight, latticed by the *jalousies*, was making a gay pattern on Cosette's carpet the next morning when she sat up and meditated on the day that stretched ahead of her. Her little

cadet was cradled in a sweet, dreamless sleep, and it touched her rather to see how preposterously young he was. Indeed, it quite set her thinking of her early days, and how she had come up in the world. Then she began speculating on *his* early days, realized with a pang that he was still in the midst of them, and suddenly grew puzzled. Being a woman of action, she prodded him. "Listen, my old one," she said, "how did a cadet at Saint-Cyr ever get hold of five thousand francs?"

Thus abruptly questioned, he lost his head and blurted out the tale of the sweepstakes. Perhaps he felt it could do no harm now, and anyway she listened so avidly, with such flattering little gasps of surprise and such sunny ripples of laughter, that he quite warmed to his story. When he came to the part about the Commandant, she rose and strode up and down, the lace of her peignoir fluttering behind her, tears in her violet eyes.

"Saint-Cyr has paid me the prettiest compliment I have ever known," she said, "and I am the proudest woman in France this day. But surely I must do my part. You shall go back and tell them all that Cosette is a woman of sentiment. When you are an old, old man in the Vendée you shall tell your grandchildren that once in your youth you knew the dearest favours in France, and they cost you not a sou. Not a sou."

At that she hauled open the little drawer where he had seen her lock up the lottery receipts the night before. "Here," she said, with a lovely gesture, "I give you back your money."

And she handed him his five francs.

★ ★ ★

ANSWERS to DID YOU EVER? on page 18

1. *They are both the same thing: a kookaburra, or large bird of kingfisher family, found in Australasia and New Guinea.*
2. 179 *feet;* 16½ *feet.*
3. *A plant: the common nettle.*
4. *New York families descended from original Dutch settlers.*
5. *a, James Thomson, in his masque Alfred, first performed* 1740; *b, Sir Walter Scott, in his play The Doom of Devoirgoil,* 1830.
6. *There are seven: Hastings, Romney, Hythe, Dover, and Sandwich, to which Rye and Winchelsea were added later. Sir Winston Churchill is the Warden.*
7. *We can think of Rebec, Recorder, Rebute (Jew's Harp), Rhythmicon and Radiotone (both electrical instruments), and Rumba bongoes (small Cuban drums).*

ICE COLD IN ALEX

CHRISTOPHER LANDON

Escaping from Tobruk by the only means at hand, an ambulance, is Captain George Anson, who has the responsibility of getting two nurses, Diana Murdoch and Denise Norton, through advancing enemy lines to Alex. Fourth in the party is Anson's Mechanist Sergeant-Major, Tom Pugh, whose wife has been killed in a raid on Plymouth.

On the edge of the Tobruk perimeter, the ambulance is hailed by the huge, lone figure of Zimmerman, a South African Captain separated from his unit. Anson agrees to take him.

Their only escape route crosses a minefield. Anson and Zimmerman pace ahead, sharing the risk as they lead the ambulance through.

Clear of the minefield, they come under fire from German tanks, and Sister Norton is fatally wounded. Zimmerman parleys with the Germans, and by a miracle they are allowed to proceed. Their battered ambulance, affectionately known as 'Katy,' shows signs of strain: a worn washer threatens breakdown. While a rear spring is under repair, 'Katy' slips down, and only Zimmerman's strength and courage in bearing the weight of the chassis save the wrecking of the ambulance. Somehow Pugh's skill keeps 'Katy' going.

On this desperate journey, the desert seems their worst enemy, but Anson, and Tom, and Diana become aware of a hidden—perhaps more deadly—menace. Why is it that each night Zimmerman goes out into the desert, carrying his heavy pack? Anson orders them to stifle their suspicions . . . At dawn, with the tight roar of a power dive, a plane comes straight down at them out of the sun.

IN that last split second of shattering sound, the dark shadow flicked over them like a bird of prey. Tom and Diana had thrown themselves flat on the ground. Anson, crouching, turned

on his elbow to see the plane banking to climb away, and his whole being filled with relief at the sight of those stubby wings and the curved tips, the roundels.

"Spitfire," he yelled, and was running out into the desert. "What's the ground-to-air recognition sign?" They were running after him and through it all he heard Tom, "A *Y* in white strips, I think."

"We haven't any strips. We'll make one ourselves. You, Zimmerman, go out about ten yards. Tom, thirty beyond him. I'll get out between and behind them. Diana, you get back directly behind me."

The pilot was very careful, he came past low in long runs four times before he climbed and headed away to the west. The noise faded.

From where he was standing Anson looked back towards Diana. "Good boy, that. Didn't stay stooging around in case he attracted attention to us. But it means—" He stopped suddenly.

"Means what?" She had walked close up to him now.

"That something he doesn't like can be very close."

They had only just picked up their food when they heard the sound once more from the west and the plane was coming in again low, flaps down. Before it got to them, there was a flash from the cockpit and coloured streamers were tossed back in the slip-stream, to float down behind their metal container and bounce on the desert. Tom ran out for it, and found the message.

It was brief and to the point.

Matruh bypassed. Jerry armour striking two-pronged Daba and Bagush nothing yet south of lat. 31° 20′ *except column running down Wire now at El Washka. Our troops falling back to Alamein. Do not repeat not attempt coast west of there. If understood circle vehicle clockwise.*

They heard him coming back, high this time, directly overhead. Anson said, "Tom, get in her quick, circle wide, right hand down." When he had done it they waited again and the Spitfire came back for the last time, so low that he seemed to be touching the desert. For a second they saw the open cockpit hood, the helmet, the goggles and one bare arm raised in salute. Then he was gone, spiralling in a victory roll, while another bunch of streamers fluttered down towards them. The message was very short this time.

Will inform all. Good luck.

The plane was high now, dwindling to a speck in the blue of the north-east. The noise thinned and faded to nothing. They were alone again and no one spoke for a long time.

Tom tidied up and refilled the radiator automatically, but all the time he was watching the Captain, sitting there, hunched in the driving-seat, scribbling furiously on the corner of the map-board. He knew what the message meant to them; that hard look had come back into Anson's eyes and he did not like it.

At last Anson put the map down and said, "Conference, chaps."

When they had gathered round, he said, " I'm not going to muck about with this. It's come down to a simple time-and-motion study. We are here "—his finger pointed at the map—" this column on the Wire is there, and to the north, Jerry has reached about there." He smiled. " At least, according to that birdman. They tend to exaggerate, but as we're grateful to him, we'll take it as true. So you see, on the coast, Jerry is a hundred miles ahead of us already, and because of the lie of the land, the farther we move east the nearer we must get to him."

Zimmerman broke the silence, " So—? "

" The cliff route is out—the odds are too great. Even if we don't meet anything, we could not last to Alamein on our water."

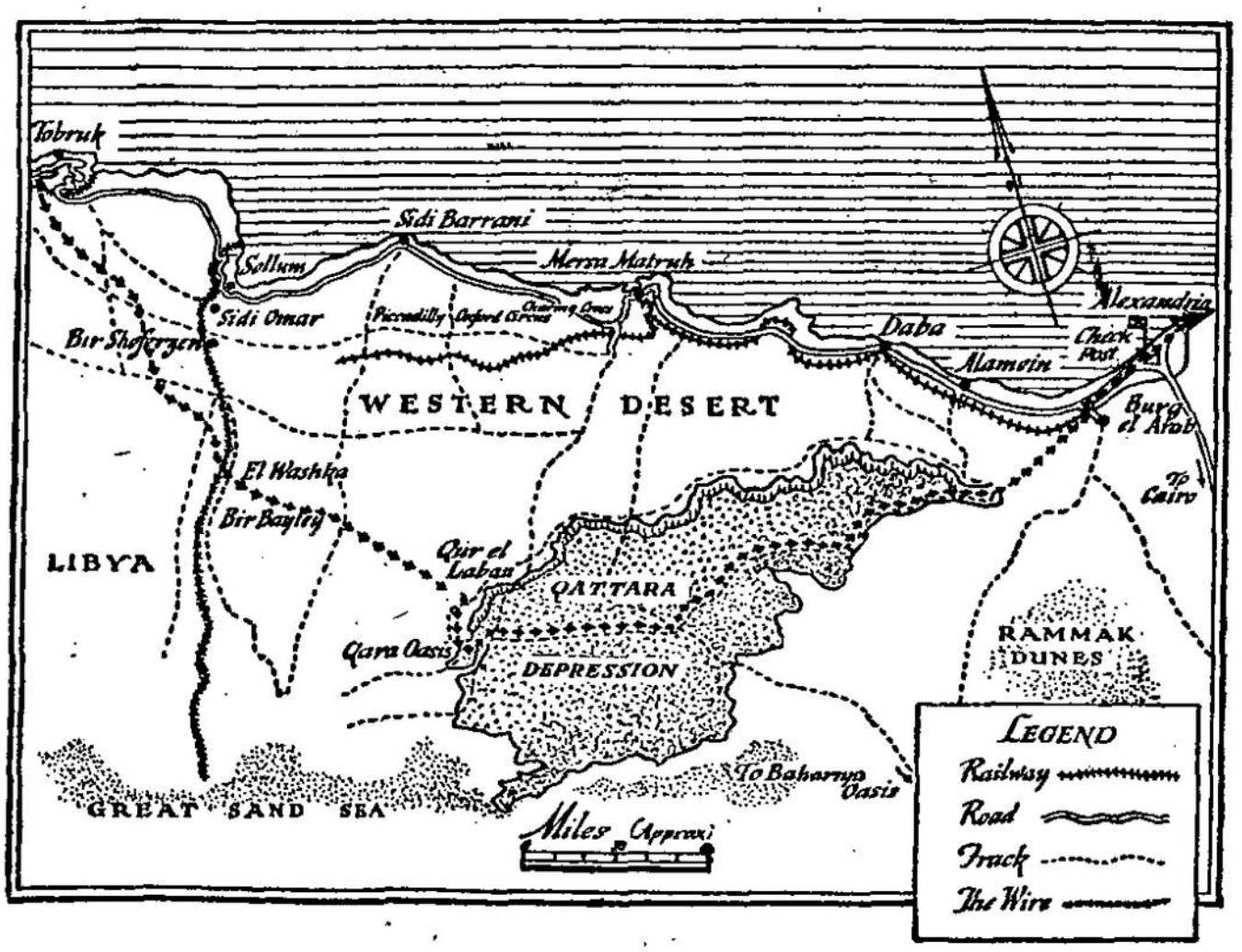
" Then—"

" Yes. It must be the Depression . . . the whole bloody way."

No one spoke.

" I'll have a crack at it—if you want me to." He said it very quietly and again no one answered.

" We know we can leave Qara Oasis full up with water—probably food and petrol as well. The only danger there will come from this column moving down the Wire—and that's where time and motion come in. El Washka to Siwa, which they must occupy first, is a hundred miles. Give them twenty miles in the hour—that's top going—and they would get there in seven hours." He looked at his watch. " That's nine tonight. Now we are only twenty miles from Qara here. Say two hours, because we've got to get down the cliff—which makes them five hours behind—apart from the seventy miles they still have to do between Siwa and Qara. A fair start."



" What do we do then? " Diana was speaking for the first time.

" Pull out ten miles from Qara tonight—that's to the edge of the soft stuff—and get cracking as soon as it's light."

" Couldn't we push on tonight—supposing they follow us? "

He gave a short laugh. " Even for a prize like you, dear, they wouldn't risk their vehicles on that stuff—and I wouldn't move an inch on the Depression at night. It's a salt marsh—a bog, if you like—two hundred miles from end to end and a hundred across the broadest part. It's all below sea level and water seeps through the deep rock strata of the desert and comes up from underneath it. The sun dries out the top in a sort of crust, thickest in summer, of course. But the whole issue is floating, really, and if you break through the crust, you've had it. There's the one track down the middle—I suppose the ground may be a foot higher than all the rest and dries out thicker and quicker. It's marked 'safe for vehicles,' but it's difficult to follow. If you don't—"

Zimmerman said, " I don't like it. Supposing—"

Anson stared at him. " Yes. Suppose that. It would mean we'd had it. But there is a chance of getting through. The other way," he jerked his head to the north, " is a certainty of walking into the bag. Do you want that? " Zimmerman didn't answer.

" Well," said Anson, " there it is. In my humble opinion, a certainty of being taken by Jerry—or a chance against the marsh. There's one thing I must tell you before you decide. You won't be able to change your minds. Once we're down that cliff, it's too high and steep for *Katy* to climb out until the far end."

Tom saw Anson's eyes fix on his and he stared at the ground because he did not want to let the Captain down, let him see the doubt in his face. He heard the voice go on quietly, " Diana . . .? Zimmerman . . .? " But no one answered.

" So I have to decide . . ." Anson was staring at the board, skin glistening tight on his cheekbones. " Well, it's the marsh. And tomorrow, or the day after, when we're bogged down to the axles, and the water's gone, and we're a hundred miles from anywhere, you can spit in my eye."

It was a silent party that started to pack up. While they were doing it, Tom saw that Diana was very pale. " All right, Diana? " he asked as he poured the precious water back in the radiator.

" No—I feel sick. Got a bit of a headache."

" A touch of the sun," he said. " Go and lie down."

When they were ready to move, Anson took over the driving, and Tom went into the back and made a compress with bandages and the tepid water, bathing her face and neck, not caring how much he wasted; he sat on the edge of the bunk, wiping gently, holding her hand between whiles, not talking, not wanting to. Soon he felt the first jolt as the car hit the furrows of the track, the rocking as they turned south along them. She was asleep now, and he went to the door for a moment, looking out at the grooves worn by generations of plodding camels, the white bones of the fallen gliding by on either side. Then he went back to his watch.

He was drowsing, nodding over her, when a jerk told him that the car had stopped. He went out into the cab, but there was no one there, and ahead on the desert, where the track dipped out of sight between two spurs of rock, he saw the little figures. It must be the edge of the cliff and they had gone on to spy out the land.

He went back into the car, shook her shoulder gently, and said, " Diana, we're at the top of the cliff, I think. The others have gone on to have a look with the glasses to see if the coast is clear. Do you mind if I go and join them? " She didn't open her eyes; just said, " Tom darling," and took hold of his hand and turned over on her side with it against her cheek. Then she made a little soft noise and went to sleep again. So he did not go, but stayed, watching her through the still, hot afternoon.

The two Captains were sweating but cheerful when they came back. The report was they had had a good view of the Oasis and there was no sign of transport there. Anson said they must move down as soon as possible. " It's a rough track, Tom. Steep slab stuff. Will you take her down dead slow, in bottom? I'll walk ahead and try to find the best path."

The ambulance entered the rocky defile and crept along, almost hanging on to the steepness of the tilted slabs of white limestone that fell away in a giant staircase over the thousand-foot cliff. Tom took it dead slow, with eyes only for the figure walking in front, ready to twist or stop according to his signals. Zimmerman was in the passenger seat, silent as usual, and then the door opened behind him and Diana came to join them.

He said, " Better? " without looking round, and was relieved by the answer, " Yes."

Soon Qara lay over on the right, the palms in a hollow with a curious white rock rising from the centre that swelled out from its base like a mushroom and had the mud village sitting on top of it.

As they went lower, the air seemed heavier, sticky. Then the smell of the Oasis came: dank, like moist, rotting grass.

They drove straight to the outside fringe of palms and it was a strange feeling to be under the shade of anything again.

Anson said, " I'll go off and scout round—see what I can fix. Zimmerman, will you come with me? You had better keep quiet, Diana, and in the shade, with Tom." Zimmerman slung his pack over his shoulder and the two of them walked off into the trees.

Tom made her sit quietly as he put the tin under the radiator and lit the fire for their tea. Underfoot was a coarse grass, and everywhere, between the tufts of it, flakes of encrusted salt gleamed; over them, the palms rustled dryly, secretly, as the sunlight slanted through the fronds. There was no other sound—except that constant dripping of water into the tin.

When the others came back, they were accompanied by a silent, ragged Siwan, riding a skeleton donkey.

Anson said, " They are pretty scared here. A British convoy came through from Siwa early this morning, probably the garrison. They went east very fast along the edge of the Depression. Must

have been making for the one track up the cliff that leads to Daba —probably sorry they tried it now. We can have all the water we want free, but he'll charge for his moke to bring it here, and make us pay through the nose for our own petrol that was left in a dump. And some dates, and perhaps a few eggs." They loaded the empty water cans on the donkey and while they were waiting for the man to come back, had their tea and food. At last the donkey appeared, laden high and followed by a procession of the curious from the village. The water cans were counted, the four gallon tins of petrol laid out beside them with a slab of dried dates and a cloth containing twelve tiny eggs.

The Siwan looked at the money that the Captain pushed over to him and shook his head. So they put out handfuls of tea and sugar on the cloth beside the eggs, and tins of milk near the dates. The Siwan watched carefully. At last, without a change of expression, he made a gesture to indicate his side of the collection was theirs. Then he scraped the tea and sugar into bits of rag that he produced from odd parts of his person, stowed the money, and collected the tins of milk. He got up and turned on his heel without a word, leading the donkey off through the palms, while the sightseers faded away behind him. They were alone again.

Anson looked at his watch. "Six. They can be no nearer than forty miles to Siwa. That gives us a hundred start. Don't let's waste it."

Zimmerman said, "What are you going to do now?"

"Push off for the first ten miles to the last ridge before the marsh. Then on again at first light, without waiting to eat."

They topped up the radiator and moved off, out from the shade of the palms. As they went east, skirting the edge of the cliff on a faint wandering track, the air seemed to get even more breathless. At Tom's suggestion, they clipped back the rear doors of the car, so getting a little relief from the wind of their passing.

As Tom sat opposite Diana on a bunk in the back, suddenly Anson's voice came through the open front door, "Ladies—and Gentlemen! We are about to begin the passage of the Masrab Mahashash. The old camel road by which all bloody fools since Alexander the Great have returned from Siwa."

Diana looked across at Tom and smiled. "He seems so cheerful, so different."

Tom leaned forward and took her hands. "Yes," he said, "we're going to be all right now."

When they reached the last slope of the hard ground, it was in the grace of the few moments before the sun went down behind the cliff and night descended. In that little time, there was nothing to see ahead but a mysterious purple flatness that stretched to the horizon, flanked on their left by the diminishing perspective of the cliff buttress.

Anson made no bones about the next move. "As I have done it once before, and as I made the choice, I propose to do all the driving while we're on this lot. So I'm going to have a proper

night's rest. I think Diana ought to have a full spell, too—make certain that head of hers is all right. You blokes can sleep all day tomorrow."

Then he looked straight at Tom. "Let's have a shufty at that pump before I lay me down."

There was no point, there was nothing to be done to it except have a look, but he opened the bonnet and waited till Anson came round on the other side. "I don't know that there's anything we can do—"

"No, Tom, I just wanted a private word with you. I must get some rest before tomorrow—I'm not feeling too good," he was almost whispering it as they bent, heads together inside the bonnet, "but I rely on you—Zimmerman must not take one of those walks tonight."

"But how can I—"

"Use your loaf, man. Do the same thing at the same time." Then Anson straightened and said, in that mocking, half-serious voice of his, "Curfew must not ring tonight," and walked back to the cab.

There were a few directions, a watch to be kept for lights and noise, the eggs they had bought to be hard-boiled at the first brew, and then he went into the back of the car with Diana.

It was a difficult, uneasy watch. Tom and Zimmerman had agreed to sit on the back of the ambulance, facing the direction of Qara, so that it would be easier to watch for lights. The darkness was complete now, a blanket round them, the only noise came when a breath of wind bore back the sound of the dripping water from the front. But he didn't care any more—there was plenty of water, plenty of everything. And he didn't mind that his Captain was just behind him, asleep there in the dark, close to his girl.

He thought of her like that now, had done since the moment she had whispered in her sleep and rubbed her cheek against his hand. But he didn't know what she really thought . . .

Suddenly, Zimmerman said sharply, "What's that?" He got to his feet and peered round his side of the car.

"What, sir?"

"A noise. Listen."

"It's only that water dripping."

"No, it was louder than that. You have a look your side, I'll take this. It came from the front of the car, I'm sure."

He walked down his side and up past the radiator, stopping to listen, hearing nothing but the monotone of the dripping water. When he got back to the rear of the car, Zimmerman had disappeared.

He cursed softly, ran a few yards out from the ambulance, and went flat on his stomach, swinging his eyes round the level of the skyline; it was an old desert trick—there was always a little difference in the dark of ground and sky, and anything on the first would show up against the latter.

Over to the left. Yes, there was something. A vague humped

bulk jutting from the ground. He stared until his eyes smarted. Was it imagination, or was that thing beside it real? A thin dark line that was jerking up against the stars?

"So that's it," he breathed and, regardless of noise, got up, and ran towards it.

Zimmerman was standing again when he reached him and it was too dark to see his face, or note anything more than that the pack was slung loosely over one shoulder.

The big man was peering about him. "I heard something. I swear it. Out near here."

Tom played for time. "Would you like to scout round a bit and see, sir? As long as we don't get too far from the car."

He looked at his watch as he walked, never more than a few yards from Zimmerman. Nine o'clock, so it must have been about 8.55. He must tell the Captain that. They made a wide, aimless circle and then went back to the car. They sat on the step, huddled in their blankets, leaning back against the door, waiting. Soon there was a soft sound beside Tom and he turned to see the big head nodding forward on the chest, the hands falling limp from where they had been folded across the pack. Captain Zimmerman was falling asleep.

Tom waited, almost holding his breath, for a minute, then reached out gently towards the dark square on the other's lap. In the same instant, there was a grunt, the head jerked up and the body stiffened, as he pulled his hand back just in time. Zimmerman, yawning, said, "Mustn't do that, must I? Supposed to be on watch."

Tom said, "Yes, sir," and laughed grimly at the thought that neither could go to sleep for fear of what the other might do. It was going to be an awful long time before dawn.

Zimmerman lay on his back, staring at the white ceiling above the bunk, feeling the gentle sway of the ambulance as it moved, hearing the creak of the body, the steady soft snores from the Sergeant-Major opposite. He was lucky to be able to sleep, Zimmerman could not. They had been two hours on the road, but there was no let-up, no peace for him. He lay there, dead tired, yet wide awake, sweating, and thinking.

Were they very clever, or completely stupid fools? His mind dodged back over every incident, considering how they had reacted.

Last night. Had it been deliberate or an accident when the Sergeant-Major had come blundering at him out of the dark, before he had even got the aerial right up and had a chance to transmit? Was it coincidence that it was the only time there had been anything to transmit—that Siwa was undefended? What had he been thinking the rest of the night, as they both struggled to keep awake, so correct, only speaking when spoken to?

There was something else that made it all the more difficult. Increasingly, he liked them—and it was dangerous to like those you had been taught to despise. It was a subconscious alliance, he

supposed, between them all against the growing challenge of the worst the desert could do. He remembered the first time he had realized that, in those tearing seconds when he had saved the ambulance. It had not been for them, or his mission, only the thought of the long, cruel walk . . . And so he had been committed: would keep it that way, help them—and not think of his mission until he had been brought safely through.

He smiled. But he would remember them . . . and all they had done. He would keep their names, numbers, if he could get them. And when the Afrika Korps was victorious in Cairo, he would do what he could.

No use trying to sleep. He swung his legs to the floor, pulled on his boots, and went out softly to the front of the cab.

There were no purple and brown shadows like those that had masked the Depression the night before: in their place, a dead flat, mottled expanse, smooth, shading from patches of brown to yellow, grey to almost blue. Everywhere, it twinkled with flaking salt. There was no rotting vegetable smell of the Oasis now; something else hung in the hot sticky air, clinging to everything, sour, metallic, like brass polish.

He looked to the south, and far off the yellow haze of the Sand Sea just broke the horizon: to the other side, the great cliff hung in folds, shadowed light and dark with valley and headland.

" What a place," he said to Diana.

" I've just told Captain Anson it reminds me of a mouldy rice pudding."

Anson laughed, and Zimmerman joined in politely.

" Twelve miles in the last forty minutes," said Anson. " We're safe from a rear attack now. Actually, I doubt if they could be halfway from Siwa to Qara yet."

" How's the track? "

" Easy for the first ten miles. Lots of new tyre marks, that convoy yesterday, I suppose. Then they branched off towards the cliff as I expected, but I managed to pick up the old track. It's faint, it would be after two years, but I can just see enough."

" Is it straight all the way? "

" For the next forty miles, more or less. Then there's a fork, and we'll have to watch that. It's marked *White Stone* on the map. Helpful, but if we turn the wrong way—to the right—we'll land up hundreds of miles to the south, in the Bahariya Oasis."

While he was talking, Zimmerman had been looking at the ground ahead and to each side of them. The track—there were faint lines like a road where tram rails have been taken up—stretched straight on to the horizon. But that was not the only thing that marked the way they were following: there was a slight, subtle change in the appearance of the ground. For about the width of an ordinary road, it curved up, lighter in colour, more gravel-strewn, the salt flakes closer, sometimes showing as solid blocks. On each side, the ground was smooth hard mud, cracked finely into an octagonal pattern: it went on unending, only changing in the shade of colour.

It looked so firm and safe. He wondered if Anson, or his own General Staff, knew what they were talking about.

Anson jerked suddenly from his crouch over the wheel, sniffed, and bent forward, listening intently with his head cocked sideways though his eyes were still on the track. "That engine's getting damned hot," he said. Then he switched off. As they coasted to a halt, another sound came above the noise of the tyres. A rumbling bubble from the front of *Katy*. When they had stopped, the front of the bonnet was wreathed in billowing steam.

"What's the matter, sir?" Tom put his head out of the back.

"Boiling like mad—but we topped up before we started. I can't understand it."

"Must be something to do with no wind and the density of the air. It seems hotter and damper to me—we're below sea level."

They jumped down and came round the bonnet as Tom opened it, showing no longer a clean engine, but caked sand and oil and spattered rust. While they were waiting for her to cool, Anson said, "No walking sideways off the track—everything fore and aft from now on."

It took a long time for her to get cool and when they topped her up, they found they had lost three pints. They went on and this time it was only ten miles before she boiled, the next time seven, the next four. Hotter . . . hotter . . . the sweat pouring off them now; the plain heaving in steady waves, the northern cliff fading and then shooting forward again in the mirage. There was nothing but the brassy sky that seemed almost filled by an ever-growing sun.

They hardly spoke. Zimmerman did not ask, could not ask if they felt as he did: that raging thirst, the lack of any desire for food, the feeling of being pressed down into their own little world as they crept across hell. Hotter . . . the cliff had gone now. Nothing but that heaving mottled plain.

In turns they went to the back to lie on the bunks, panting at the stream of hot air that drifted by in the speed of their passing. All except Anson. Zimmerman wondered how long Anson could stand it, hunched over the wheel, hands slipping in their own sweat as they clenched the rim, mile after mile, all through that endless morning.

At last something came out of the mirage in front of them and did not fade away as they approached. It was a single patch of colour that cleared to a flat white rock, just to the left of the track.

"White stone," said Anson, and cut the motor, and when they stopped, leaned forward over the wheel as the clouds of steam billowed up in front of them. Stiff-legged, he got down from the driving-seat and walked round into the back of the car. "Brew up if you want to," he jerked over his shoulder as he went.

They left him for a time, but they were too exhausted to do more than make tea and hard-boil the eggs. They managed to swallow an egg each, and chewed at the sweet stickiness of the dates. Zimmerman looked across at Diana and said, "He must eat something, otherwise—"

They took a mug of tea and some dates and an egg into the back of the car. Anson was flat on a bunk, eyes open, his bare chest panting convulsively.

He said, " I don't want any."

" But you must—"

He turned his head slowly. " Is that an order, Sister? Yes, Sister, if you say so." Then his eyes slewed round to Zimmerman. " What's he, the Matron? You would make a bloody good Matron, Zimmerman." And he started to laugh, or tried to, but no sound came, only a quicker shaking of the throat and chest.

Zimmerman pushed past Diana. He shouted, " Eat it," in a parade-ground voice, and between them they managed to lift him up and hold him while he swallowed the pieces of egg. Anson muttered, " I feel bloody," and Zimmerman picked him up as if he were a baby, and carried him through the open door at the back to sit him on the step.

He held him with one arm and said, " A can of water, Sister." When she had passed it, he tilted the whole of the two gallons over Anson's head and neck and body, so that it ran down off the step and was sucked into the salt like a sponge. Then he scooped up the wet limp body in his arms again and carried him back inside; he saw that he was asleep before he had put him down. All the time the girl had been watching without a word.

He looked at her now, shamefaced almost, as he muttered, " A can of water—so little—for a brave man." Then he went round to the front of the car before she had time to answer.

The Sergeant-Major was there, head pillowed on his arms against the steering-wheel as he slumped in the driving-seat. He touched his shoulder and said, " Sergeant-Major, the Captain is asleep. But I think he would like you to go on. Would it be of any help if I went out in front to guide you? "

Tom's head jerked up. " Not out there—in this heat. You would fry, sir. Come and sit here by me, and we'll manage somehow."

Perhaps because they had eaten, things seemed a little easier in the afternoon. By six they were forty miles farther on, ten halts for the boiling behind them, three more gallons of precious water gone. Anson was still asleep in the back, reported Diana, who had stayed with him. He had woken twice and asked for a drink, but had not displayed the slightest interest in the fact that they were moving.

It was Tom who called a halt. There was no reason for it from any consideration of geography. It was the eleventh boiling. He said, " We can't go on overheating her like this. Let's call it a day now—it will give us a better chance for tomorrow."

They stopped. No turning off, no looking for shelter in that emptiness. The faint thread of the track went on and on in front; the firmer mark of their own tyres thinned to nothing behind them. The sun was lower, the mirage gone. No northern cliff was there to keep them company now; only to the south, the faint yellow,

jagged line of the Sand Sea, with the hazy plumes blowing sideways from the points like smoke from a row of factory chimneys.

" There must be a wind up there to blow the sand off like that," said Tom.

Zimmerman grunted, " I wish the bloody thing was down here."

Slowly, drained of all energy, they fumbled over the making of the brew, and it was nearly finished when Anson came out of the back, followed by the girl. He did not remark on what had happened except to say, " Sorry to have been so long." He sat on the sand, sipping his tea, looking at the map-board. " Did you take the speedo reading? " he said.

" Yes. Forty-two from the white stone."

They all watched while he measured. " That's good. Only—" he turned to look down at the wheels of the ambulance—" only, I wish we had got a bit farther. This part is the lowest of the whole issue. We're sitting on top of a perishing jelly here. We'll have to watch out she doesn't bog down in the night." He looked better, Zimmerman thought: the eyes were really taking in what they saw, the fallen-in look gone from the face as far as he could see through the beard. But then he stared sideways at the smooth, flat mud, stretching unending on and on. It looked so firm, so safe. For the second time he thought, " He doesn't know what he is talking about . . ."

When they had finished, Anson said, " Tom, do the headlights work on this crate? "

" Should do, sir. But of course, we had them all disconnected."

" Well, in case of anything—" he looked at the wheels again— " wire them up. And have the sand-mats out ready."

The heavy air was cooling now. They sat on, smoking, basking in the blessed relief. They watched the sun go down, blood-red behind them and the purple shadows flood out once more over the flats. Just before it was dark, Anson got up and went to the back of the car: he came out with two of the white water cans, walked ten yards back and put one down, then forward past the radiator to leave the other the same distance in front.

Then he came back to them. " Your territory behind, Diana: we'll take the front. You can sight on the gleam of the can going out, the bulk of the car, coming back. But don't go a step sideways." He looked over his shoulder to where the Sergeant-Major was bending over the bonnet, fixing the wiring of the lights. " Did you hear that, Tom? "

" Yes, sir."

Zimmerman wanted to smile. Already there was a twinge of regret at his earlier feelings. The English were not worth it. But why this business about the lights? The detailing of the only path he could take . . . right in their range. Did Anson believe in these fantastic preparations, or was it a trap? Did they think him that much of a fool? Then he would transmit tonight. Just to show these clever English. It would be amusing when they saw his footprints on the mud in the morning . . .

He waited, smoking, and listening to the snatches of dying talk until it was quite dark. 8.30—just right. The girl had gone to bed and the Sergeant-Major had said he was soon following. He and Anson were taking first watch to see that the wheels did not sink. A waste of time.

He got to his feet, stretched, and moved towards the cab to unclip the spade. " I won't be long." No one answered. He slung the spade over his shoulder and with the pack bumping on his back started to stroll down the track ahead.

When the gleam of the water can came up to him, he turned sideways and took six quick steps to the right. His boots felt the gentle fall-away of the ground and then he was on the smooth mud, as firm and solid as he had expected. Crouching, he fumbled with the straps of his pack, and soon the flap was open in front of him. He was just feeling for the knob to extend the aerial, when the darkness was rent by the searing white light of the twin headlamps. The suddenness was a physical shock as they fanned out to miss him by a yard.

As he went flat, he swore. So that was it. Anger welled up in him at the charity he had wasted. Crouching again, bending double over the pack clutched to his chest, he started running farther sideways, away from the light. The first steps were normal . . . but then something happened. The foot on which he had his weight would not come forward in the next stride, and for a moment he was left like that with the other foot pawing the air. To regain balance, he dropped it quickly, hard.

There was a soft, shivering sigh . . . a crackling that spread away from him in every direction over the mud. Now his back leg was up to the calf in tepid treacle that pulled . . . and pulled. He twisted, falling on his side, and the crust crumbled beneath him. The comfort of those headlamps seemed so far away now.

A horrible sour smell was coming up all around, and with it a noise—slow, heavy bubbling. But that steady downward tugging was the worst.

He started to scream.

Diana was getting ready to slide under her blanket when she became aware of the first of the chain of events that led up to those screams. After she had been out behind the car, she had come in through the back door and switched on the interior light—for Anson had said the black-out didn't matter here. The door to the front had been ajar, and she could hear the soft murmur of the two men's voices. Then Anson had said, sharply, " *Now*," and in the same moment the white reflection of the headlights had flooded back through the crack in the doorway. She dropped her bag and pushed through to see what was happening.

After so long, the twin beams, so white, so straight, seemed almost indecent. They slashed the track ahead, etching the faint marks of the old tracks; but there was no sign of anything else.

" What are you doing? "

Anson said softly, "Trying to catch our friend with his pants down," and Tom laughed.

She had started to say, "Well, you haven't—" when the screams started; they came from ahead and to the right of them.

Tom shouted, "The bastard's gone in—" Then Anson's voice, tense and quiet, "Start her up, Tom. Drive on slowly. Swing over a bit to the left of the track and come round to the right. But, for God's sake, don't go too far."

The headlights wavered a little to the left and then came round in a slow arc to the right. Anson was standing in the cab, ripping off his shirt, then boots and stockings; as his hand reached for the buckle of his shorts, he said, "Sorry, Diana—but that stuff stinks." Then, pale and slim in the headlight reflection, he was at the front wings, uncoiling the long, bamboo-stiffened strips of canvas that were the sand-mats.

At the edge of the light, something low and dark showed . . . another few degrees and it was in the centre of them. Tom stopped the car. The mud looked grey and ten yards out on it there was a darker patch, jagged, with cracks running away from it like a hole in a frozen pond. In the middle, something that moved . . . a black slug that raised an arm at slow intervals to claw the air. The screaming was coming from it.

All was confused after that. Anson, naked, was stepping out carefully towards the hole as he unrolled a sand-mat in front of him; Tom, wrenching off his clothes and following with the second one from a slightly different angle; Diana being shouted at and told to stay where she was. Then Anson and Tom were both lying flat, reaching out to the black thing that had stopped moving, then crawling backwards, dragging it after them, foot by foot, until they were safe at the edge of the track. The smell came back to her in great waves . . . the soft puffing of the bubbles. She was not looking at them now, only at that dark patch centred in the glare of the lights. On it, rocking, was a square pack. Slowly, it tilted to one side and disappeared.

Anson's voice reached her as they dragged Zimmerman to the car. "A can of water—quick. Then look at the wheels and see if they're sinking. I wish to God we had a drink."

When she came back, she had the water and her flask. She said, "The wheels look all right." They were kneeling beside him, stripping off the stinking, sodden bush-shirt and she saw that it was split right down the back. Then Tom took the water from her and started to dash it over Zimmerman's face, while Anson tried to clean out his mouth and nose and ears. She held out the flask without speaking and Anson took it. He poured the spirit back into Zimmerman's mouth so that it spilt down his chin and onto his chest. Zimmerman choked and spluttered and the breath came out of him in long uneven shudders.

"He'll be all right now," Anson got to his feet and was holding out the flask, "but we must move on a bit. The whole stratum's disturbed and the track might collapse."

Tom backed the car very gently. When they were straight, Anson said, " Wait a minute."

While Tom held the sagging body, he got down and went to the side of the track where the bush-shirt lay in a dark heap. He lifted it, holding it at arm's length, walking into the glare of the headlights to turn it round, looking carefully. Then, going to the edge of the mud, swung it to gain momentum and then threw it out so that it landed with a dull splash in the middle of the hole. He came back wiping his hands against his naked flanks.

When they had moved on fifty yards, they set about the task of cleaning both themselves and Zimmerman. Water was too precious so they used petrol. The smell of it was sweet beside that of the sour metallic mud. As she helped them soak and scrape and rub off with one of the blankets, she thought, suddenly, of all the blanket baths she had given and wondered if there could ever have been another one like this.

They managed to get the silent, semi-conscious Zimmerman into the back and covered him up. Then Anson went out and switched off the headlights.

The darkness seemed intense; she could only hear them groping for their clothes. Anson's voice came, " I'll see how he is—and get some blankets out. We'd all better kip down on the sand for tonight."

She said, " That pack—" and stopped.

" I know—I saw it. Closer than you did. Now it's gone—we need not discuss it."

They showed her how to make a hole for her hip and they all curled up in a row on the sand and it was quite comfortable. Sleep came very fast. It seemed only the next second that the scratching noise wakened her . . .

It was daylight; Anson was squatting a few feet away from her with a tin of petrol beside him, scrubbing at Zimmerman's shorts with a stone. He stopped to smile at her.

Soon both of them were beside her, eating eggs and dates, sipping tea, and Zimmerman came out of the back to join them. He had a blanket draped round his shoulders and she thought he looked so much older, as old as he had after the time he had held the ambulance on his back. A surge of pity went through her.

Zimmerman squatted down beside them. " I wish to speak of last night—I—" She was looking at the streaks of blue-grey mud that still mottled his neck. But there was something else different, the voice seemed to have changed: deeper, more guttural, the accent not so clipped.

No one said anything; Zimmerman took a date, chewed it, and spat out the stone. Then he looked at Anson. " It was madness—to disobey your orders, Captain."

Anson went on quickly before the big man could say anything more. " Today should be easier. Only sixty-five miles to the end of all this. With halts, I should say five hours. We should be there at three, but it may take time to find a good place to get up the

cliff, even though the cliffs are much lower there. We can't be at the top much before dusk. That last run to the coast is about sixty on one bearing, and I don't want to do it in the dark. I think the thing is to find the best place, lie up there, and then do the climb and the last leg in one crack tomorrow."

It was not as bad as the day before. The air seemed cooler, and not so sticky, the view not quite so desolate as the ground rose and fell in slow waves that always gained a little in height. The track had edged close to the southern side of the Depression, and sometimes they had to cross thin tongues of hard ground that reached out into the mud flats. Beyond this, the dunes were still there, but not the massive structure of the Sand Sea.

On their other flank, the cliff was closing fast. It was lower too, more broken and, in places, there were what looked like smooth easy slopes. They still had to make their halts for the boiling radiator, but the gap between was creeping up from six miles to eight . . . to ten. At one halt while Diana stood by the bonnet, a few puffs of wind came down from the north to ruffle her hair. It was the first movement of air she had felt for days.

Soon the mud flats dwindled to isolated patches: there was a different sound in the movement of their tyres. Then the northern cliff curved round in front of them to block the way to the east.

They had made it. They were through the Depression.

Tom, driving, gave a great shout, and Anson, sitting on the floor beside Diana, said; " Take her in at a gallop." She turned from the passenger seat and stepped over him to go into the back. Zimmerman was lying there, quite still, naked but for his shorts.

She said, " We've made it, Captain Zimmerman." But he did not answer; did not even look at her. He lay there, hands clasped behind his head, staring up at the roof as he had done all day.

They turned towards the north end of the cliff, running close along it, looking for a likely place. At last, Anson said, " That looks a good one," and they stopped and walked over to where the end of the sand-fall met the desert floor. He started to walk up it, slowly, carefully. When they began to follow, he looked back over his shoulder and called, " No, stay where you are. We don't want to disturb the pattern more than we need."

" Pattern—? " She turned to Tom.

" I forgot. On a slope, the grains always lie in a certain way to each other. Once that's mucked up, they don't grip—start sliding. And our wheels wouldn't grip."

They watched Anson climb on. After the first few yards, his feet were digging in, slipping back a little at each step, while the sand flowed down over the toes of his boots. When he came back to them he seemed preoccupied.

" It's pretty dodgy, Tom. I don't remember it being anything like as bad as this when we came last time."

Tom looked at him, " You only had to come down it then."

" Well, we had better look at one or two others."

They tried six in all, but the sand was the same, and they came back to the first because it seemed the lowest. They camped a little way from it and had started the tea going when Zimmerman came out of the car for the first time that day.

As they ate, between mouthfuls, Anson gave them details of the remaining supplies. " Thirty-two gallons of juice, that's ample: fourteen gallons of water, four sweet, and the rest from Qara. Seven days' vehicle rations untouched. And it's only a hundred miles to Alex." He looked over his shoulder to the sand slope behind them, glowing red-gold in the setting sun.

" We'll go up that like a dose of salts in the morning—and the next drink I have is going to be ice-cold in Alex, in that little place off Mahomet Ali Square. There's a marble-topped counter, and high stools, and they serve the best and coldest beer in the Delta. And when we've got this lot sorted out, I'm going to take you there, and buy you one."

Tom said, " Couldn't we spare a couple of gallons of the bad water now to have a clean up? I wouldn't want to be seen like this in a town."

Anson laughed. " A wash and brush-up? We haven't got a razor—what about poor Zimmerman? He hasn't got a shirt."

Zimmerman spoke suddenly. " There's soap and a razor in that small pack of mine. Help yourselves."

" Well "—Diana could see Anson hesitating—" it mightn't be a bad idea." He looked across at her. " I'm sure you could do with a swill, Diana. All right, a gallon for us, and a gallon for you. Would you like it heated? "

" Just tepid," she said, " straight out of the can."

They found her a tin and she went round to the back of the ambulance and stripped off all her clothes. It was heaven to feel the dry air flowing over her body and let the lukewarm water trickle down the back of her neck to spread out over her spine and fall down her thighs. The clothes felt quite different when she put them on again, and, barefoot, she went round to the front of the car to join the others.

Tom was just finishing his shave. As he wiped his face on a towel she had not seen before—presumably from the Zimmerman haversack—and smiled at her, she hardly recognized him.

He said, " Captain Anson thought we might like to have the first shift. He's gone in the back with Zimmerman—he's still a bit worried about him."

" Shift? What are we supposed to watch for? there's nothing to watch now."

He looked at his feet. " I don't think that was quite his idea. He said, ' Stooge around if you want to—but don't get lost.' "

So it had come at last. She said, " All right—if you want to. As it's the last night, let's go for a stroll."

" What about your feet—won't they get sore like that? "

" No, I like it. It makes me feel clean."

They walked off along the hard flat bottom below the cliffs,

towards the red ball of the sun that was dipping below the Depression turning the rock walls into shades of deepening pink.

Soon the night came down and the stars pricked out one by one. She looked back and the ambulance was a vague blur over to the east. Without saying a word, they sat down at the foot of one of the sand slopes and Tom pulled out his cigarettes. As they smoked, the talk strangled into shorter sentences, died.

Suddenly he got to his feet, throwing away his cigarette. "We'd best be going back."

"Why, Tom?"

"Because it's better."

"But why?" She got up to face him.

In the starlight she could see that he had turned his head away.

"Tomorrow," he said, "you'll be back in your hospital, a nursing Sister with two pips up. I'm a W.O. It—everything—would be too difficult . . ." His voice trailed away.

"But would it be?"

"It might—" his voice was rough, "and it would spoil even this. I want to keep this—don't you understand?"

Time dripped out its slow seconds under the silent, circling stars. She stood close, looking at him, eyes nearly level with his.

"Am I that stiff, snobbish nursing Sister now?"

"No."

"What am I, then?" He did not answer; only turned his head away blindly, like something that is hurt.

She said softly, "I think I know what I am—to you—now. I'm going to put my pride in my pocket and say that I'm hoping, so hoping, that I'm right. And I want to be like that to you, always."

There was only a dry sob and he was stumbling forward into her arms, and as she held him tight she knew that she was the last refuge for all the sorrow and loneliness of two barren years.

Afterwards, when they had finished the lovers' first bout of "Do you remember?" they lay back against the soft warm sand, heads pillowed on arms, looking up at the wonder of the heaven.

She said suddenly, "What was your wife's name?"

"Ann."

"Tom, do you think she would mind?" He did not answer for so long that she turned to look. The dark eyes beside her were staring up, fixed on Orion.

"Would she?" she said again.

He answered very softly. "She was always so unselfish. It made her happy to see me happy."

"That makes me feel sort of cheap—a pick-up."

"No."

There was silence again, then she said, "Are you, by any chance, working round to a proposal, Tom?"

"Sort of . . ."

"Then you needn't say any more. Because I accept, darling. But I'll always remind you that I—" The rest was lost as his big square hand was placed over her mouth.

" I've only been trying to think of all the complications, on your account."

" I can look after myself," she said.

When they got back the car was dark and silent and there was a neat pile of blankets stacked outside with the glimmer of a white piece of paper pinned to the top. Tom pulled it off and took it over to the dashboard light to read. She heard him chuckle, and then he stuffed it in his pocket.

" What does it say? "

" Personal to me—from the Captain—and it's rude."

She was aghast. " But he can't *know*—"

" Know? He's not a fool. And he's back in his old form again. That's what *matters*."

" He's nice, Tom. One of the nicest blokes I've ever met."

" They don't come any better than that," he said.

They made their beds together, side by side, and when they were down, she spread the blankets over both of them and came close, pulling his head down on her shoulder.

" You sleep," she whispered, " I'll take the time from your watch—wake you before the others. You've got the worst of the driving tomorrow."

He lay still for a while and then turned his head restlessly.

She said, " What's the matter, darling? "

" I'm worried."

" About us? "

" No. That sand up there. It's going to be dodgy."

" Leave it till tomorrow. You sleep now."

He said drowsily, " The Captain said we'd go up like a dose of salts—I hope so." He did not speak again and soon she felt the steady rise and fall of his side against her breast. She held him close, thinking of everything: not of the past, only the future—the village, the garage . . . children. A tender smile played on her mouth, and then she stared across the Depression floor to that sand-fall on the cliff, pale in the starlight, silent and challenging.

The scheme was that the three of them should walk halfway up, leaving Tom to rush *Katy* up on her own; then they would run on behind to push, if necessary.

The dawn was just coming when they made a start; Diana and Anson going up one side against the cliff wall, Zimmerman on the other. As she plodded up behind the Captain, she looked across and back down the slope. It did not vary in angle from top to bottom, smooth, unbroken, the colour of clotted cream. Diana noticed that with every step her feet would sink in and slide back a little as the sand in front ran down, slithering over her ankle with a soft persuasive sound. Like the others, she had gone barefoot.

About halfway up Anson stopped and said, " That's enough—he should be moving fairly well here. Just go across and get your shoulder to it and shove." He called across to Zimmerman, and he halted, too.

The ambulance was clear in the new light below them, and she looked small and square, like one of those miniature toys. The noise of the starting of the engine came up to them and they saw *Katy* circle off to the far side of the hard ground below before turning to come straight at them, accelerating. The sound of the motor rose to a high-pitched snarl: *Katy* was flat out in third gear when she hit the bottom of the sand.

She seemed to rise up towards them as if she were on a lift: it gave the impression that the car was stationary and the sand and the slope were running down behind it. The engine got louder and louder; over it Anson shouted, " I told you—like a bloody dose of salts." Twenty yards separated them . . . fifteen . . . and then Diana noticed something different.

The car had another movement now, besides the forward one. The bonnet seemed to buck from side to side as if it were a fresh horse trying to get its head; great plumes of sand were spurting from behind; the sound of the engine was no longer constant, but rising and falling in a sob. Then the whole thing slewed sideways as *Katy* seemed to sit down on her haunches. The motor cut to silence. When they had run over, she saw that the back wheels were buried up to the axles.

Tom looked at them from behind the wheel. " Too soft."

" Give me that spade," said Anson. " You, Zimmerman, get the sand-mats. We'll dig her out and run her onto them. Then, Tom, you take her down backwards and have another go."

He tried twice more, and Anson three times, always taking a fresh track, but they never got farther than the first mark. Always, just before that point, the wheels began to spin, the momentum went, and *Katy* would buck and bury her back wheels.

Minute by minute, the sun rose higher, hotter. Now that smooth slope was furrowed like a ploughed field. Then, at the sixth attempt, *Katy* started to boil. Anson glowered at the steam billowing from the bottom of the rust-splashed radiator. " We'll have to take her up on the sand-mats, six feet at a time."

Two on each side, they took it in turns to clear a level trough in front of the back wheels and feed in the mats, holding them taut until the tyres had taken a grip.

They made the whole length the first time and about half the second, before one wheel started spinning and sank in. The third time, nothing. Both mats ripped through to shoot out behind like two snakes while the tyres showered up sand as they bit their way down to axle level.

It was then that Anson seemed to go mad. He snatched the spade and threw himself down by the wheels, almost hacking at the sand in his fury. " Get round the other side and dig," he shouted.

She said, " But you've got the spade."

" Well—use your bloody hands—but *dig*. And when the mats are in, get round to the back and push . . . *push*."

After that he did everything except hit them. He seemed to be

everywhere, never stopping, pushing and swearing at them . . . at *Katy* . . . tearing at the sand with his fingers. Once, when Zimmerman, bare to the waist, had stopped for a moment to wipe off the sweat, he turned on him, snarling, " Come on, man, don't just stand there."

It all became dreamlike after that: a nightmare only pierced by the physical pain of her nails worn down to the quick from the scrabbling, the raw bruises on her shoulders from heaving at the back of the car. But always beside her, pushing, cursing, there seemed to be Anson.

Anson, with his yellow mask of a sweating sand-grimed face, the two holes in it that showed the insane eyes.

It mustn't happen . . . it mustn't, she thought. He's going mad . . .

Twice she had slipped at the rear of the car and fallen on her face, while a sand-mat had smacked across her back and the spurting sand had filled her nose and mouth and ears. Only afterwards, she remembered his sobbing voice beside her as he heaved and strained, " Get up, you bitch." And she did not know or care if he meant her or *Katy*.

There was just one feeling now—that of a great resentment; they had all stripped off to the waist, they were cool. She felt the wet heavy weight of her shirt, the sweat trickling between her breasts. It wasn't fair . . . she'd show them . . . if he spoke like that again, she'd take it off.

Tom stopped it all. Suddenly, the engine cut, and as they sat down panting, he came round to the back of the car, " It's no good, sir."

Anson, sitting on the sand with his head between his knees, did not look up. " What do you mean—no good? "

The line of Tom's jaw hardened. " She's boiling—overheating all the time. And a seized motor won't get us to Alex."

" So what? You want to walk, do you? " He raised his head and looked round wildly at each face. " All right, clear out, the lot of you. Here's the compass."

There was a soft sound as it fell at Tom's feet. " Help yourselves to all the water and food. Keep on 30° for two days. And I hope it keeps fine for you. Only leave me alone."

He put his head between his knees and there was no sound but the sawing of the breath in his throat. At last he looked up again. " I'm going to get this bitch to Alex—somehow. Do you understand? I'm going to. It's a personal thing."

Tom's voice was very gentle. " No one wants to walk. I just thought we might try to wind her up."

Anson stared at him. " Wind her up—on the handle? With the plugs out, you mean? "

" Yes. We've only done it over a few feet before. But in reverse—the lowest gear—I don't see why it shouldn't work."

" But how are you going to turn her round? She'll turn over on a slope like this."

" I don't think so, not if everyone hangs on, putting their weight on the inner side when she's across the angle."

Anson seemed to shrink. " You carry on." He got up and walked over to the strip of shade by the far cliff wall.

Tom stood looking after him. " We'll dig her out first," he said, " then I'll let her go back and lock over sideways. I shall do it right hand down. So I want you two to come and hang on the right side when I do it. Lean out as far as you can—it may make just the difference to stop her going over."

It took a long time to get her across the slope with Diana and Zimmerman hanging out backwards as far as they could. It seemed as if the angle was impossible, that at any moment the inside wheels would lift up under them, and *Katy* would roll over down the hill. But Tom, from the driving-seat, said, " It's all right," and then he put the steering hard over the other way and coaxed her with the engine until they were facing downwards. In doing it they had lost all the ground they had made in the last hour.

She said, " What do we do now? "

" Wait—until the bloody plugs are cool enough for me to get them out." She left him and went over to the boulder by the cliff where Anson had stayed all the time, sitting with his head down. He was breathing like a man who has run a losing race. She said, " Tom has turned her, George. He's waiting for the plugs to cool. But I don't understand what he's trying to do."

He didn't answer for a moment: then to the ground, between his feet, he said, " Sorry—it's just that I counted so much—on getting there today."

" But we will. Please tell me what Tom's up to."

He didn't seem particularly interested. " If you take the plugs out of the engine there's no resistance from the compression. You put her in the lowest gear, that's reverse, and just wind the handle in front—the starting-handle. Because the gear is so low, the wheels move so gradually that they don't disturb the pattern of the sand grains, and can grip. That's the theory."

She looked up the yellow mound that went on ahead of them. It was only a hundred yards before it ended in the line of clear sky. For a moment she wondered why no one had bothered to trudge up and see if it was really the end of their troubles. Then she understood—no one had dared.

There was a noise from the ambulance, and she saw that it was Tom shutting the bonnet and going round to the radiator with the starting-handle. She held out both hands. " Come and watch him, George. Please. He's trying so hard."

By the time they had gone over, Tom had started turning slowly, winding in rhythm like a man with a barrel-organ. It did not seem to take any effort. He looked up at them and smiled; without stopping the winding, he said, " I've just worked it out—thirty-two turns to every six feet up—that's if there's no slipping."

They went round to the back wheels, silent, watching them. They were turning so slowly that they hardly seemed to move at

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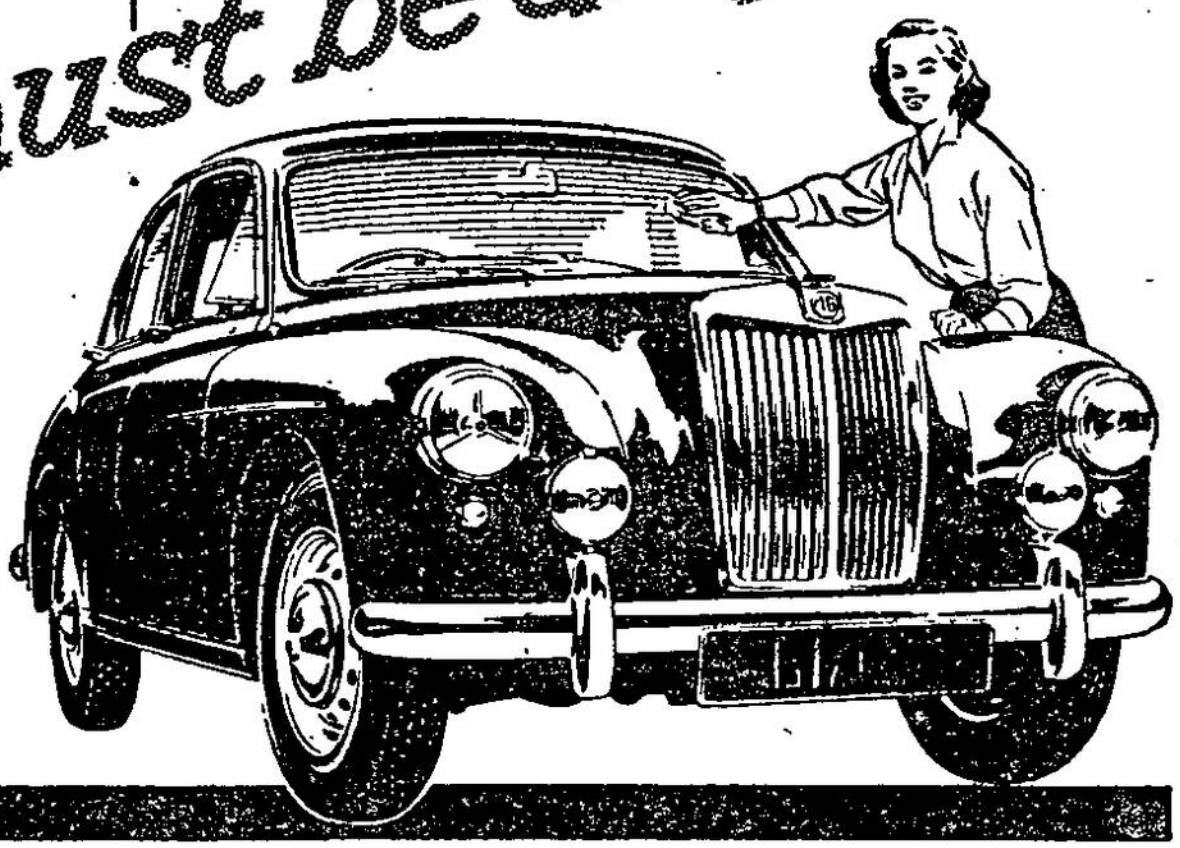

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all: but as each bar in the tyre-tread dipped down to bite at the sand, though it sagged, there was a fresh clean surface waiting to take the next one.

" Look! " It was Anson, crouching now behind one wheel. The firm pattern of the tread was beginning to show, as *Katy* moved away back from it. They were rolling up—not slipping.

" It's working, Tom! "

Tom, winding, not stopping, said, " I thought it would."

They took it in shifts after that, five hundred turns each. When Diana's turn came, she was surprised at the little effort necessary to wind the great bulk of *Katy* backwards up the slope. It seemed that at any moment *Katy* must lunge forward, bearing down on whoever was winding in front, but they said the gear-lever had been lashed in position, so that this could not happen.

Each in turn, they wound, watching with a sense of achievement the straight, firm tracks stretching out behind them. But in between the two, there was something else . . . and she knew it was not good. There were dark blobs on the sand where the drops fell from the radiator. When Tom came round as she was winding, he stared and then scuffled the trail out with his boot. " Don't let Captain Anson see," he whispered.

498 . . . 499 . . . 500. Each in turn reached the magical number and handed over. Zimmerman was at it now, and there was only ten yards left to the unknown, beyond the barrier of sky. But no one made a move to find out if there was another ridge beyond.

Then Anson broke the tension. " Hold it, Zimmerman. We may as well look and know the worst." They all scrambled up the last few feet to the top.

It was the end. There was nothing but a flat, stony plain that stretched on towards the horizon, with a faint ridge showing to the north-west. There was something else: a wind, hot, dry, bearing down on them from the north. As she stood there, feeling it search inside her clothes, pulling at the strands of her hair, Diana felt cleaner, happier, from the first moment.

Anson looked at his watch, glanced down the slope at *Katy* just below, then at the long, long way to the bottom. " Two and a half hours for a quarter of a mile." He gripped her arm and pointed. " But look—"

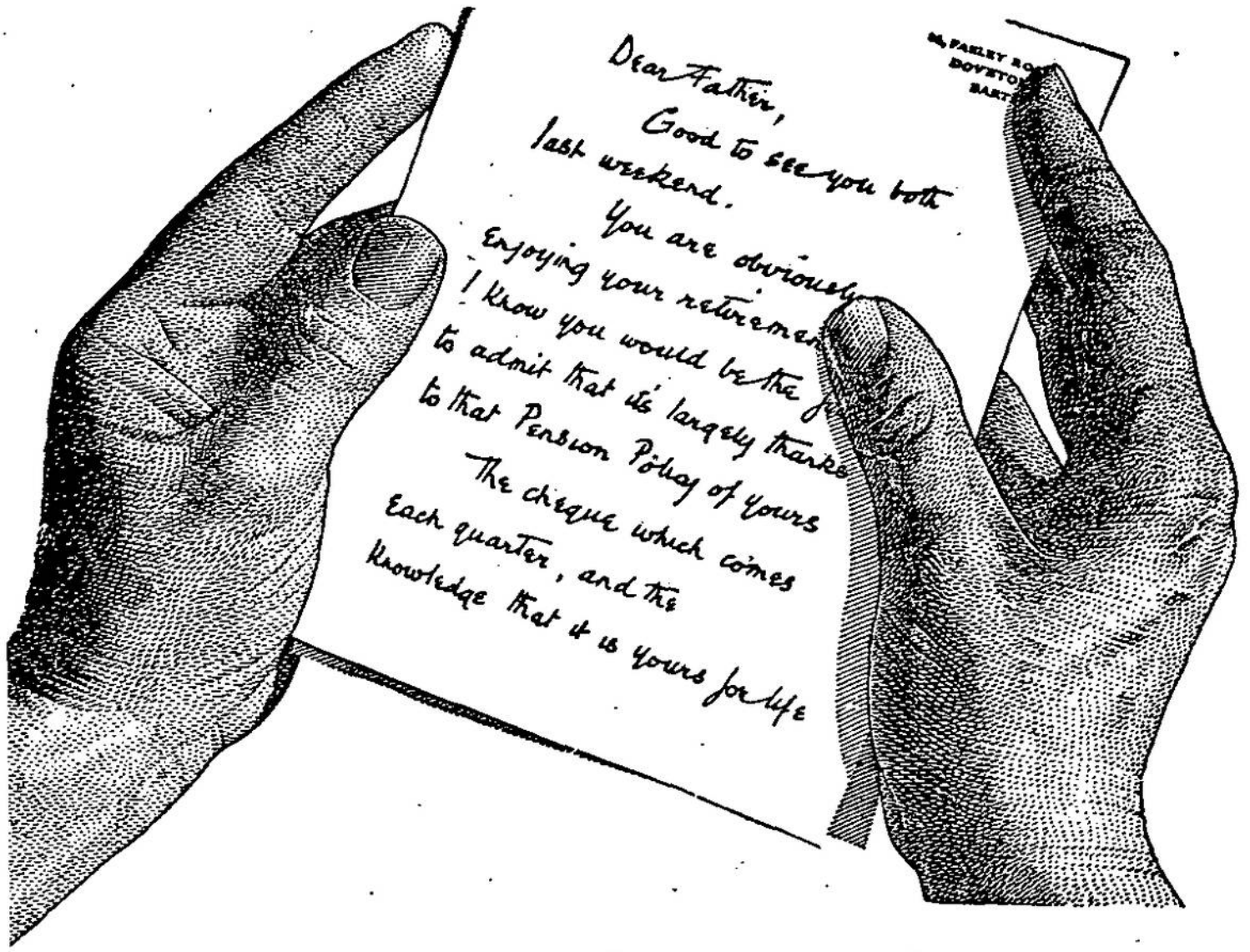
The sky had that brassy tinge that they knew so well that they hardly noticed it. Now, to the north, almost on the horizon, it shaded to a deeper, clearer blue.

" The reflection of the sea," Anson said.

After the radiator had been filled, she heard him give the course, " Sixty miles on 68°, Tom. And if I can navigate at all, we'll finish slap in the middle of Burg el Arab railway station." It had been funny to hear of an ordinary everyday thing like that.

They went on steadily; there was no thought of stopping, except to top up the radiator. The stages were getting shorter again, but at least *Katy* was not boiling the whole time.

Eventually, they could see the tattered ant-heap that was the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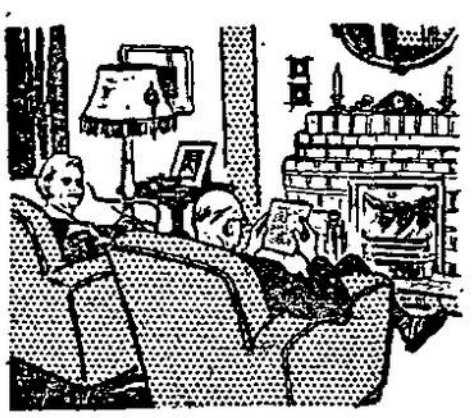

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native village: beyond it, the first proper building, the white walls and red roof of Burg el Arab station.

Anson peered at the speedometer. " I'm slipping. A mile short—and too far to the south." They changed course a point and went on slower, silent, searching for a sign. Then Tom said, " The flag, sir, just to the right of the station, on that dump. Red-and-blue. It's Ordnance." And they knew they were right.

They were on tarmac now—a real road at last—that led over the last ridge in a cutting. When they had reached the top, the main road was below, crowded with traffic all running west. As they slowed down at the road junction to turn to the right, she saw the signpost. It said, ALEXANDRIA 30 MILES.

The check-post was at the junction with the Cairo road; much larger than Tom remembered it before—a small village of tents now.

Anson said, " Pull off in front of the office, Tom. I'll go in and grapple with officialdom." He jumped down. " This is going to give them a shock. Give me your paybook, Tom. Diana, have you got an identity card? " When they had handed them over, he looked towards the back of the car. " I'll fix him—but watch the back." He walked off into the office.

A tall Captain of Military Police came out with Anson and looked at them as if they were beings from another world, as he said, " Captain Anson's told me all about your trip. I think it's a bloody marvellous effort. I'll phone your hospital, Sister, and let them know you're coming." Then he looked at them again. " What about a quick wash? I'll show you my tent—and get a shirt for your South African pal at the same time." He looked towards the back of the car. " How is he—by the way? "

South African pal? Tom opened his mouth to speak, but Diana's fingers were biting into his arm. " Asleep," she said.

The M.P. Captain made to move off and then turned back. " Are you sure you won't have a drink? "

" No, thanks," said Anson, " we've got a date for that."

Tom had finished topping up the radiator by the time Diana and the Captain came out again. She looked a clean, very different person, and Tom felt a surge of possessive pride.

They climbed on board, the shirt was handed up, and they set off on their last lap.

But after the first quarter-mile, from the back came that sudden sharp crack they had heard before. *Katy* sagged to the right, and Tom swore and let her ride to a gentle halt.

Anson's head came round the door. " What the hell, Tom? "

" It's that other spring," he said.

" Well, out of it—all of you." He looked back into the car. " And you—Zimmerman." They all got down in the road.

" I've just worked out with Zimmerman that we've done nearly six hundred miles, over every kind of stuff, and there's four left to do. We'll take her in on blankets. We've done it before, and I'm

not going to scrounge a lift and leave the old bitch now. Get the jack out." He smacked *Katy*'s olive bonnet hard.

Tom wondered why Anson had got out the tool kit for the job when it would not be needed; understood, when he saw him take the largest wrench, holding it loose in one hand as he watched Zimmerman all the time.

The blankets were rolled in tight bundles and then wedged between the spring and the jacked-up chassis. When the space was filled, the jack was lowered, squeezing the two together. *Katy* sagged, but not quite so much as before. Then Tom bound the whole with rope, down the sides and along, to prevent slipping. All the time, Anson stood to the side, swinging the spanner, watching Zimmerman: a silent Zimmerman, who looked strangely smart in the shirt that was two sizes too small for him.

Tom straightened. "There's another thing, sir. A big end. Come and listen." He opened the bonnet, started her up, and worked the throttle. Anson frowned. "Big end as well. Sounds like number four."

"Shall I take the plug out, sir?"

"Yes. We'll go in on five cylinders and a pile of blankets." He looked round them all, swinging the spanner gently. "And we want the weight as far forward as we can get it, so you can all get in the cab. Take her in—in style."

Tom did not see the beginnings of the city. He was too intent on watching the road ahead. And there was something else to worry him: above the whistling pump of the open number-four plug, the clatter was growing. Other big ends were starting to go.

No one talked in the unbearable rising tension. Tom was not hungry, not thirsty, but once when the Captain said, "I hope that beer's damn cold," his mouth started watering uncontrollably.

Now there was the narrow cleft of Sister Street with the dark buildings towering high to the narrow strip of blue. At the end of it, a patch of green.

Anson said, "Mahomet Ali Square."

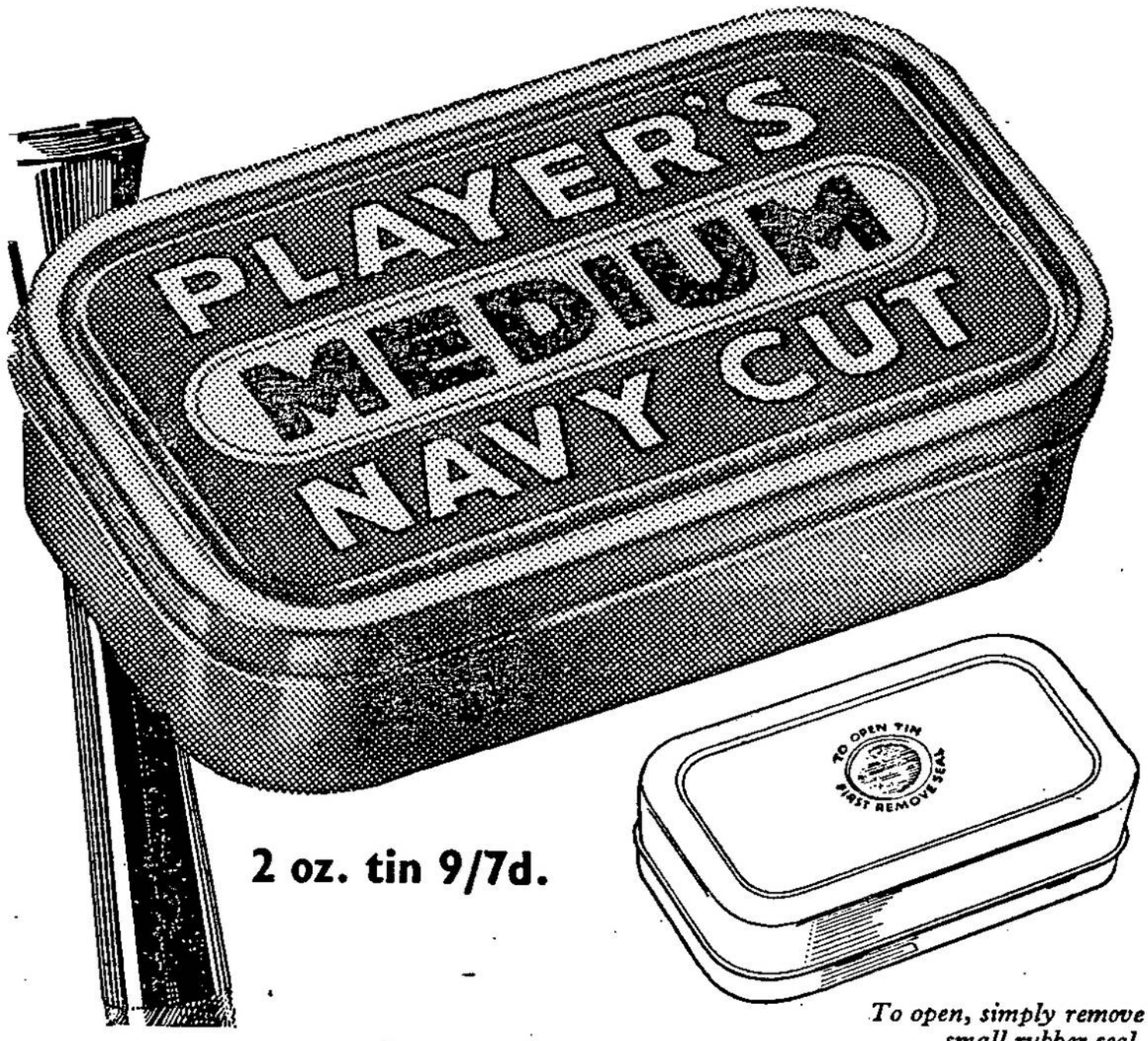
People shouted at them, a tram gong clanged, but they took not the slightest notice; all their senses were strained to watch that patch of green that slid nearer and nearer towards them. Anson wondered what Zimmerman was thinking.

The clatter was rising, a vibration coming up through the floorboards: for the first time a smell of hot oil, the well-known clouds of steam billowing out from under the bonnet. Tom shouted, "Shall I stop?" but Anson, sitting outside with Zimmerman and still holding that spanner, said, "It's only the other side of the square. Keep her going."

They limped out of the crack of Sister Street into the sunlight and there was the wide square with the gardens in the middle. They crept round the square; he had to coax her now to move at all.

Then Anson said, "Pull in. That's it."

He cut the switch and coasted to the kerb, and there was no sound for a moment but the rumble of boiling water in the radiator,



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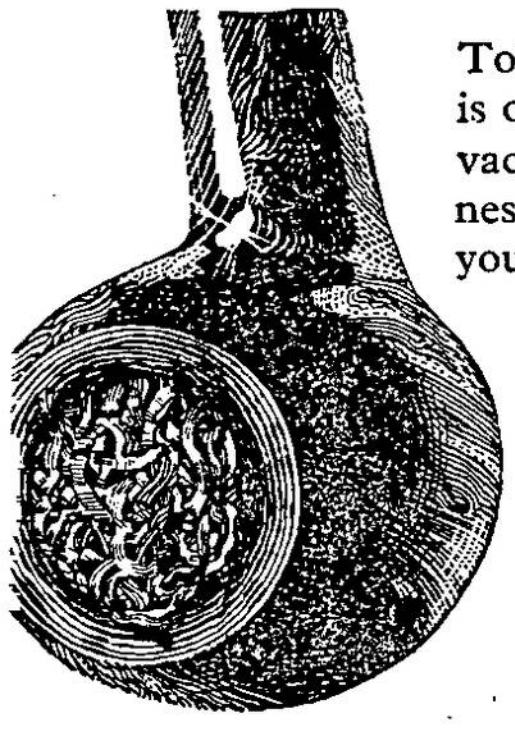

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and the sounds of the traffic that seemed to come from another world.

Anson got down and threw the spanner on the floor with a clatter. "Come on, you lot." Then he ran his hand very slowly along the hot, rust-spattered bonnet. "You good old bitch," he said.

As they scrambled down to join him, each—even Zimmerman—touched *Katy*'s flank, although they did not speak. With Anson leading, and Tom and Diana falling in behind Zimmerman, they walked across the pavement and into the narrow side street. At the corner, Tom turned for a last look at her: lonely now, battered, with that strip of bullet-holes running down her side, propped up on blankets, sizzling, but triumphant.

It was six o'clock: too early for the usual drinking crowd, and the bar was quite empty. It was just as the Captain had said it would be: the high, marble-topped counter, the tall stools against it, the clean, light room, the few tables grouped round the walls. After they had pushed through the swing door, they trooped up to the bar in silence, pulled out four stools and perched on them in a row. The barman yawned and got up from his seat to come forward and look at them without enthusiasm.

"Yes . . ." A pause, and then, "sir?"

"Set 'em up," said Anson.

"What up?"

Anson turned to Tom. "He thinks we're tramps. He thinks we can't pay. He's forgotten the order we put in six days ago." He fumbled in his pocket and produced two crumpled pound notes that he put on the counter.

"Get cracking, Joe. *Four very, very cold beers.*"

When they came up, they were as he said they would be: pale amber, in tall thin glasses, and so cold the dew had frosted on the outside before he put them down. They stood in a row now, but Tom waited, as he knew the others were waiting, for Anson to make the first move. He stared at his for a moment, looking all round it as if it were a rare specimen; then ran his finger up and down the side of the glass, leaving a clear trail in the dew. He said, "That's that," and lifted the glass and tilted it right back. Tom watched the ripple of the swallow in the lean throat, and there was a tight feeling inside him and his eyes were smarting and he knew that in a moment he would cry. So he lifted up his own glass and swallowed fast.

When Anson put his glass down it was empty. "I quite forgot to drink your healths," he said. Then, to the barman, "Set 'em up again."

It was easier with the second one and they started talking, but Zimmerman did not speak.

Tom said, "What about *Katy*?"

"I'll phone the V.R.D. and get them to pull her in. It's gharries for me from now on." Then he turned to Zimmerman. "You

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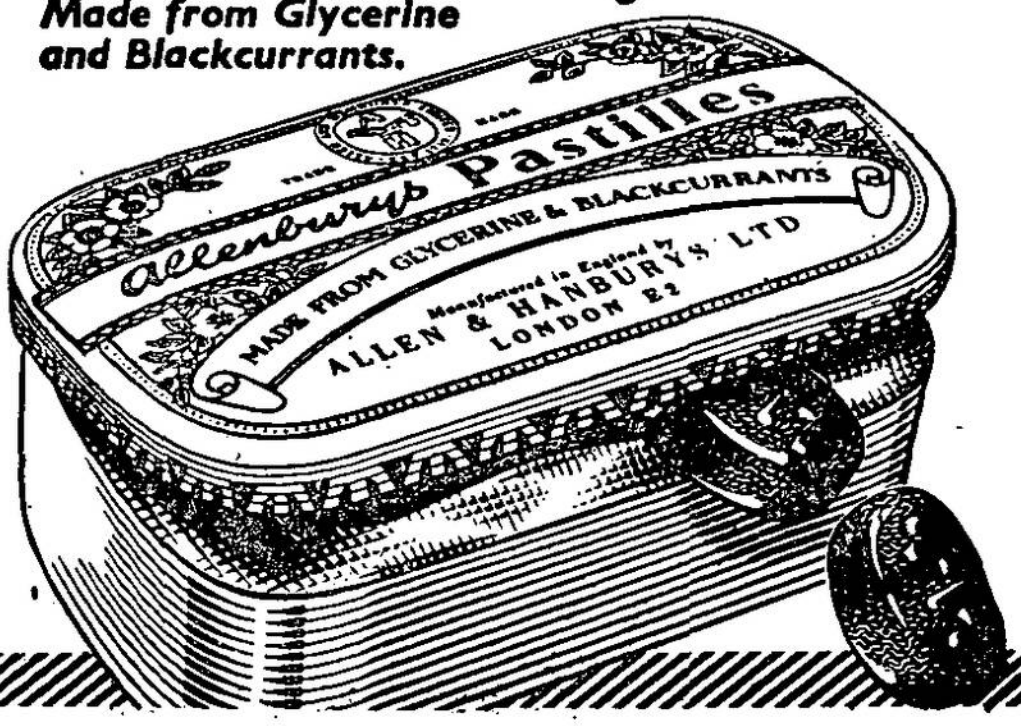

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are our problem child. No clothes, no identity card, no money, no nothing. I'm afraid they'll take the hell of a long time to vet you. I'll have to come—and I don't feel like answering any of their bloody silly questions tonight."

Zimmerman spoke for the first time. " I hadn't thought of that. But must I bother you? Can't I just slip off to my own people? "

Anson shook his head. " No. I've a better idea than that. Let's leave it all till tomorrow. Come with me tonight to where I usually stay. Mother Thompson's—she's got a boarding-house on the front. She's very good to me—she'll lend us cash—and clothes, even if they're only civvies. Then we can bath and eat and sleep. Face everything in the morning."

All through this conversation, Tom had been watching Zimmerman. His face shaded through every expression from indecision to resolve, brightening visibly at the mention of civilian clothes.

" Captain Anson," Tom thought, " he's gone plumb crazy. Give that crafty —— civvies, and he'll dodge out at the first chance, and they'll never find him."

But Zimmerman was saying, " Thanks, man. It seems the best idea. It's very kind of you."

" Well, I'd better ring her now. She likes good notice." He slipped off his stool and went over to the telephone box that was in the corner. Tom went on watching. Something was flowing back into that big man. He looked younger, stronger every moment. Tom knew what hope looked like now.

Anson seemed a long time, and when he came back he did not climb on his stool. He stood behind them and said, " That's fixed," and there was a subtle change in his voice. " Will you bring your drinks over to a table for a minute? I've something private to say."

They got down, wondering, and then Zimmerman said, " I think I'll wash my hands." Anson, standing between him and the door, said, " That's an idea, so will I." Tom saw his eyes flick at him, so he said, " Will you excuse us, Diana? " and they marched out to the back of the room in procession.

All the time in the toilet, there was bright talk on how the war was going. Anson gave details of how the line had been steadied at Alamein, how lucky they had been to come out east of that. Tom wondered where he had got this information. He had spoken to no one except the M.P. at the check-post, and surely then he would have mentioned it before. Perhaps Zimmerman spotted it, too, for he tried to dry his hands rather quickly and get out of the door in front of them, but somehow Anson was there first, and they walked back to the bar in their single file. He had only one glimpse of Zimmerman's face. It was grey, and the broad shoulders seemed to be shrinking.

Diana was waiting, standing by the swing door out into the street, peering over the pane of frosted glass. She said, " There is a truck just drawn up outside. It's full of—" She swung round and she saw Zimmerman and her face changed: behind her, they

could all see beyond the edge of the glass the flat red hats of military policemen as they spilt out over the pavement.

Inside the bar it was so quiet, so still, he could hear the flies buzzing. Tom looked once at Zimmerman's face and then at the ground. He could only think of two things: that straining, cracking back that had held *Katy* until he had got the jack underneath—and the other thing to come, the grey cold of a dawn, the wall, and the firing-squad. It seemed such a bloody shame.

Anson's voice was tight. "They've surrounded the place, Zimmerman, but I've arranged they don't come in for another ten minutes. So we must talk quickly. I'm sorry, but what else could I do but ring Kom-el-Dick?" And he knew that last desperate question was addressed to him and Diana.

He looked across to the barman, and shouted, "Another round—over here." Then he pulled out a chair for Diana and sat down beside her. The Greek came over with the tray, put down the four tall glasses, and departed, scratching. Anson leaned forward across the table. "Zimmerman. What is your real name?"

There was no answer. The big man looked at his glass, rubbing his finger up and down the outside, as Anson had done.

"I'll tell you just exactly what I told our security people," Anson went on. "That we came out of Tobruk, that, later, we picked up a German officer, whose truck had broken down, who had started walking, who had got a touch of the sun. That he surrendered, gave his parole to me, and has behaved in a most exemplary manner. And that I would deliver the body after we had a drink together."

Still Zimmerman did not answer. The barman lifted a hand to the radio on the wall behind him and fiddled with the knobs; a bright, metallic voice started singing, *Sand in my shoes . . .*

Anson said, "You can get away with the hell of a lot when you're moving round—but just with us three, so close, I don't think you had a chance. And you had bad luck with your own people. To get us through them was a miracle."

Anson's voice went on. "But there was no harm done—even with that precious pack of yours. I know it was a transmitter."

Zimmerman looked at him and then down at his drink. He picked it up at last and took a long swallow. Still he did not speak. Anson's arm came out across the table, gripping him by the elbow.

"Can't you see, man, there's no time? Tell me your name—stick to our story. I'll vouch for Tom and Diana, though we shall be risking a Court Martial. But there will be no more bother. Otherwise, I'll have to tell them a lot of funny things; give them the map reference where they can find a pack and a bush-shirt. They wouldn't take a lot of digging out. And then—?" He spread his hands. "But we don't want it—any of us—because we know damn well that we couldn't be here if it hadn't been for you."

The swing door slammed open and a Lieutenant of the Military Police came in. He was tall and thin, and Tom saw that he had pale knees. He said, "Captain Anson?" to the room at large.

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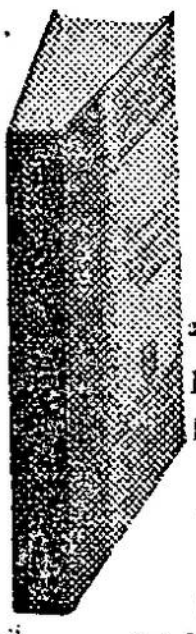

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"That's me." Anson looked at his watch. "You're early."

The Lieutenant slapped his cane against his leg. "That may be, but this fraternization—"

Anson tilted his chair back and said one short and very rude word. The Lieutenant flushed, "Must I remind you, there is a lady present?"

Anson looked at him. "I know, and if she had thought of it, she would have said it herself. But it doesn't alter the fact you are overriding your C.O.'s orders. Do you want me to phone and tell him?" Then he looked down to knee level. "Just off the boat," he said to no one in particular. "Got to learn. Thinks all that ironmongery is the answer."

The Red Cap flushed again as he fingered his revolver holster, "Then I'll wait outside."

Anson said, "Do," and when the door had closed he leaned over the table. "For God's sake—can't you see? It's the last chance."

Zimmerman looked down at his drink, picked it up, and drained it in one gulp. He said, quite simply, in a very different voice, "Otto Lutz, Hauptmann Engineer, 21st Panzer Group."

There was a silence, and then Captain Anson's voice came again, urgently. "Now, listen. You lost your way—the truck broke down, Otto. You started to walk, then the sun got you. We picked you up after we'd buried Sister Norton. You only heard about that. From then on, just as it happened."

He stopped for a moment to look at the others. "Is that all right with you?" Hardly waiting for their quiet yes, he asked, "Quick—is there anything on you—or left in the ambulance, that might need explaining?"

Zimmerman . . . Lutz, it was wiser to think of him like that . . . considered for a moment and said, "Perhaps—in my pack, but I don't think so."

"Well, I'll dump the lot—without looking—off the deep water quay, just in case."

The door opened again, and Pale-knees came in. "Really!" he said. Anson got up.

"Will you fraternize with us, Lieutenant, and have one?"

"No, thank you."

Anson smiled at Lutz and said, "That's that." Then he stared at those knees again. "He'll learn one day."

The Hauptmann was on his feet now. He looked at Anson and smiled and said, "So you release me now from my parole, Herr Captain."

"Certainly." Anson looked across at Pale-knees. "I've told your Commandant that this officer has behaved in an exemplary manner. There's no need for a ball and chain. You'd better run along with nursie, Lutz."

Lutz looked round the circle of them. "It's been a great experience. Will you shake hands?"

They all murmured something, and while the Lieutenant looked down his nose, he took their hands in turn across the table. For

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Diana, there was a special click of the heels and a quiet, " Fräulein."

He walked to the door with the Lieutenant, and then turned back to look at them once more. He said, " It has been something. All against one—against the greater enemy. I have learnt a lot." Then he gave them that silly stiff bow again, the door flapped twice behind him, and that was that.

They stayed quite still, looking at the blank door, until they heard the truck start up and the noise of the motor fade into the background of traffic.

The radio was still playing softly on the wall, the barman appeared to have gone to sleep. Anson broke the silence. " I'd better go and dump that pack off the end of the quay before I get inquisitive."

Diana said, " And I must get to the Hospital."

Anson looked at both of them. " I made another phone call. I took the liberty of ringing them. I said that you would be escorted by a W.O. who would need accommodation. You can beat me up in the morning, Tom, and we'll find our precious Unit." Then his voice went grave. " Tell your Matron, Diana, I want to call on her about Denise."

She said, " I would like that. And I want you to wade in on something else. You can smooth out the marriage business more easily than anyone. And we want it to be soon."

They went out into the noisy sunlight of the square, to *Katy*. She was there still, cool and silent now, somehow dejected. Anson went into the back and came out with Zimmerman's pack.

He sat down on the step and looked up at them: drawn, dirty, without a cap, but his eyes were back in the living world again. " I wish I had a camera," he said. " Two people, about to enter into holy matrimony—entirely blinded by sand."

Tom was holding her hand now, was surprised when she let go with a whispered, " Don't be cross." He watched her walk over to the step of the car and put both hands on Anson's shoulders as she stooped to kiss him full on the mouth.

Anson smiled at them. " See you both tomorrow," he said.

They stood, holding hands again, watching the slim figure grow smaller and smaller as he went down the square towards the sea. She said, " I do want it to be quick, darling. And then I want a baby as soon as we can, so that I can get out of this, and home, and start things up—for you to come back to."

There was a Red Cap standing on the pavement opposite, trying, obviously, to make up his mind to come over and check them for being improperly dressed and holding hands.

Tom tried to slip his hand loose, but she held on fast.

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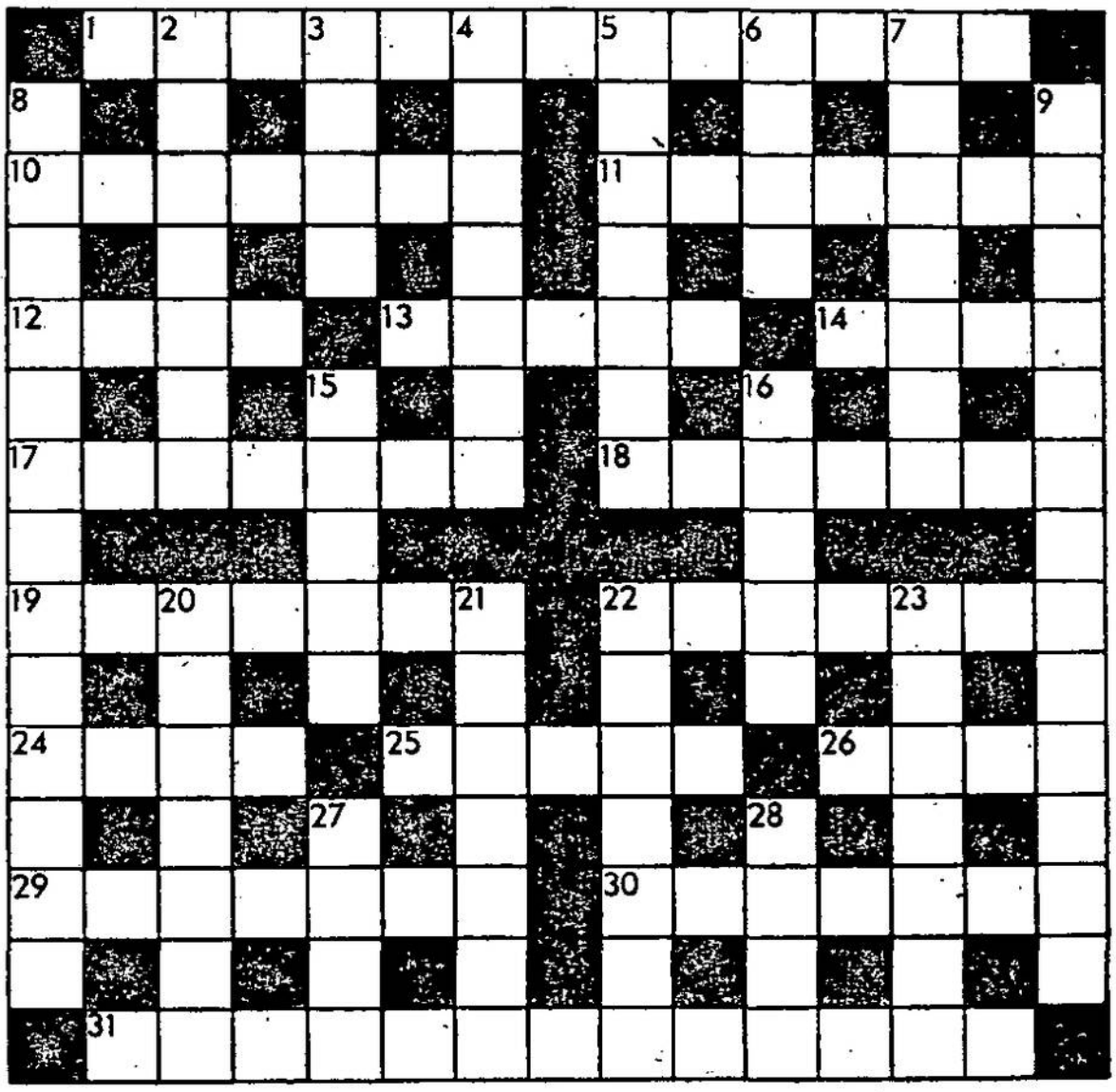

CLUES

Across

1 Think before mad repetition (13).

10 Back-room boys are, for instance (7).

11 His gang had a jarring experience (3, 4).

12 Greek Cupid (4).

13 Newt in a niche (5).

14 A potty dynasty ! (4).

17 Opposite of age, in fact (7).

18 It's dry, red, and 30 (7).

19 Upstanding heraldically (7).

22 Mannerless highway man ? (4-3).

24 Novice easily turns to riot (4).

25 "Like — all tears" (Shakespeare) (5).

26 A wild party can be gory (4).

29 Literally beyond the pale (7).

30 "Under the roof of blue —— weather" (Shelley) (7).

31 The blarney this man blends ! (13).

Down

2 Blame regarding the strength of the spirit (7).

3 Illiterate gospeller's signature ? (4).

4 Exhibit negative game (7).

5 Do business on the road (7).

6 Catch on to a tiny bough (4).

7 Lesser triumph (7).

8 Going from bad to worse (13).

9 Hung a hag in Ely to make the beast merry (8, 5).

15 Sounds like want of dough (5).

16 He was auriferous and aurally asinine (5).

20 Domestic set-up's nearly warlike (7).

21 Singular French hush (4-3).

22 It's trash, dump it (7).

23 A plucky player (7).

27 Public enemy number one (4).

28 Water colour ? (4).

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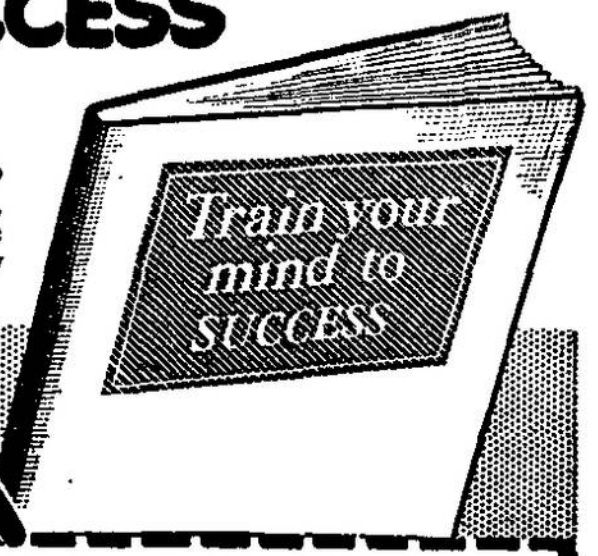

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